

А. ФАДЕЕВ

РАЗГРОМ

РОМАН

ИЗДАТЕЛЬСТВО ЛИТЕРАТУРЫ НА ИНОСТРАННЫХ ЯЗЫКАХ
МОСКВА

THE ROUT

by A. FADEYEV

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РАЗГРОМ

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I. MOROZKA

His battered Japanese sabre clattering on the steps, Levinson went down into the yard. The smell of honeyed buckwheat came from the fields. The July sun swam in a hot rosy-white foam.

Morozka, the orderly, beating back a troop of brazen guinea-fowls with a whip, was drying oats on a sheet of tarpaulin.

"Here, take this to Shaldiba's detachment," said Levinson, holding out a sealed envelope. "And tell him.... No, there's no need. It's all written down."

Sulkily Morozka turned his head away and flicked his whip. He did not want to go. He was fed up with these dull official rides, these useless messages, and above all with

that strange look in Levinson's eyes. Large and deep as twin lakes, they took in Morozka, boots and all, seeing in him many things of which, perhaps, Morozka himself was unaware.

"The bastard!" the orderly thought, blinking with an injured air.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" Levinson demanded.

"Well, Comrade Commander, why is it always Morozka that's got to go everywhere? Isn't there anyone else?"

Deliberately Morozka said "Comrade Commander" to make it sound official; he usually addressed Levinson simply by his name.

"Perhaps I ought to go myself, eh?" Levinson asked acidly.

"Why yourself? There's plenty of men...."

Levinson thrust the envelope into his pocket with the resolute look of a man whose patience has been taxed to the utmost.

"Go hand your rifle over to the quartermaster," he said with deadly calm, "and clear out. I don't need any loafers here."

A gentle wind blowing from the river ruffled Morozka's unruly curls. In the parched wormwood near the shed the grasshoppers tirelessly drilled the red-hot air.

"Wait!" Morozka said sullenly. "Give me that letter."

Stuffing it under his tunic, he explained, not so much for Levinson's benefit as for his own:

"Leave the company, give up my rifle? Not likely!" He shifted his dusty cap to the back of his head and concluded in a hearty, unexpectedly cheerful voice, "It wasn't for your beautiful eyes we started the ball rolling, friend Levinson! I'm telling you that in plain miners' language."

"Now you're talking," the commander laughed. "You didn't have to be so mule-headed, you dolt."

Morozka pulled up Levinson by the button of his coat and said in a mysterious whisper:

"See, brother, I was just getting ready to go and see Varya at the hospital, and then you turn up with that letter of yours. That makes it plain you're the dolt."

Slyly he winked a greenish-brown eye and chuckled, and in his laugh—even now, when he was speaking about his wife—there was something obscene, something that had been eating into him like rust for many years.

"Timosha!" Levinson called to a fellow who was slumped up on the porch and blinking the sleep out of his eyes. "Look after the oats—Morozka's riding off."

Near the stables, sitting astride an overturned trough, the blaster Goncharenko was mending some leather packs. He was hatless and sunburnt, and his dark reddish beard was thick and matted. His flint-like face bent low over the packs, he plied his needle with such force as if he were wielding a pitchfork. His powerful shoulders heaved like millstones under his coarse-cloth shirt.

"What, riding off again?" asked the demolition man.

"Yes, sir, Your Blasted Excellency!" Morozka stood stiffly at attention and saluted by putting his hand to an unmentionable place.

"At ease!" drawled Goncharenko graciously. "I've been a fool myself once. On what business have you been sent?"

"Oh, it's nothing; the commander wants me to take some exercise. He's afraid I'll start breeding bastards here if I don't get my fill of it."

"Fool!" the blaster grumbled. "You blabbing ass from Suchan!"

Morozka led his horse out of the stable. The long-maned colt twitched its ears nervously. It was a strong, shaggy trotter, and it resembled its master: the same clear greenish-brown eyes, just as squat and bow-legged, wearing the same roguish and lewd look.

"Mishka! You devil!" Morozka growled affectionately as he tightened the girth. "Mishka! You god-damn old son of a bitch!"

"If it took brains to ride," Goncharenko observed gravely, "then Mishka would ride on you, by God, not you on Mishka."

Morozka cantered out of the yard.

The overgrown country road ran hard by the edge of the river bank. Beyond the river rolled sun-drenched fields of wheat and buckwheat. The blue caps of the Sikhote-Alin Range bobbed in the steaming haze.

Morozka was a miner's son and himself a miner. His grandfather in Suchan, forsaken by his God and by men, had ploughed the soil; but his father had already given up the black earth for coal.

Morozka was born in a dark barracks near Pit No. 2, just as the shrill whistle was calling the morning shift.

"A son?" his father had asked, when the pit doctor came out from the tiny room and broke the news. "That's the fourth," his father summed up with a resigned air. "It's a gay life!"

Then he tugged on his tarpaulin jacket, black with the coal-dust, and shambled off to work.

At the age of twelve Morozka learnt to get up with the whistle, to push the trucks, to swear obscenely and irrelevantly, and to guzzle vodka. There were as many drinking-shops at the Suchan mines as there were mine tipples.

Two hundred yards from the pit the valley ended and the volcanic hills began. From their slopes giant moss-covered fir-trees gazed down sombrely at the settlement. In the hoary, misty mornings the deer of the taiga tried to drown out the whistles with their calls. Through the bluish cracks in the hills, over the steep passes, along the endless tracks, day after day the trucks crawled towards the Kangauz Station. On the ridges, the windlasses, covered with black oil and quivering in constant tension, wound their slippery cables. At the foot of the passes, where stone buildings stood incongruously among the scented firs, the men laboured, not knowing for whom; the railway engines hooted out of tune, the electric lifts hummed.

That was a gay life.

In that life Morozka had not sought new paths but had followed the old and safe ones. When the time came he bought a sateen shirt and top-boots of box-calf, and, on holidays, went down to the village in the valley. There, with other youths, he played the accordion, yelled fruity songs, and "spoiled" the village girls.

On their way back, the "miner fellows" stole watermelons and ripe round cucumbers and splashed about in the swiftly flowing mountain stream. Their lustily bawling voices awakened the taiga; the waning moon watched them with envy from behind a crag; a warm damp mist floated above the river.

When the time came, Morozka was clapped into a filthy police-station reeking of bugs and sweaty foot-wraps. This happened at the height of the April strike, when the underground water, turbid like the tears of the blind pit horses, trickled day and night in the pits, and no one pumped it out.

He was locked up not because he had performed doughty exploits but simply because he was a chatterbox: they thought they could frighten him and make him squeal on the trouble shooters. Sitting in the stinking cell with bootleggers from Maikhe, Morozka told his cell-mates a great number of smutty stories, but did not betray the strike leaders.

When his time came, he went off to the front and was put in the cavalry. There he learnt, like all cavalrymen, to look down with contempt on the "foot sloggers," was wounded six times, suffered twice from shell-shock, and was discharged for good and all on the eve of the Revolution.

Coming home he drank hard for a fortnight and then married a kind and loose woman who was a cart-pusher in Pit No. 1. Everything he used to do he used to do thoughtlessly; life seemed to him as plain and as simple a thing as a round cucumber from the Suchan melon fields.

Perhaps, it was just an impulse that made him go off, together with his wife, to defend the Soviets in 1918. At any

rate, from that time there was no going back to the pit for him: they had not succeeded in preserving the Soviets, and the new authorities looked askance at such fellows as Morozka.

Mishka cantered along with an angry clatter of his iron-shod hoofs. Orange gadflies were buzzing infuriatingly round his ears; they got tangled up in his shaggy hair and bit him until the blood came.

Morozka rode into the Sviyagino military sector. The village of Krilovka, where Shaldiba's detachment was quartered, lay hidden behind a hill covered with bright green hazel-trees.

"Z-z-z-z . . . z-z-z-z!" came the hot song of the unrelenting gadflies.

A strange sound exploded and rumbled behind the hill. Then came a second, a third; as if a wild beast had torn its chain and was hurtling through the prickly bushes.

"Wait!" said Morozka under his breath as he pulled in the reins.

Obediently Mishka stood stock-still, his muscular body straining forward.

"Hear that? That's gun-fire!" the orderly muttered, straightening himself in the saddle. "Gun-fire, eh?"

Rat-tat-tat, barked a machine-gun behind the hill, sewing together, with its fiery threads, the deafening cracks of the shot-guns and the sharp crackle of the Japanese carbines.

"Forward—gallop!" Morozka shouted in a tense voice.

His toes welded to the stirrups, he undid the holster of his revolver with trembling fingers, while Mishka tore through the swishing bushes to the hill-top.

Just before he reached the top Morozka abruptly reined in the horse.

"Wait here!" he said, leaping to the ground and throwing the reins over the saddle. Mishka, faithful slave that he was, did not need to be tied up.

Morozka crawled on all fours towards the summit. To the right, by-passing Krilovka, waves of small identical figures with green and yellow bands on their caps were rolling in perfect lines as though on parade. To the left, groups of men were running in wild confusion in the golden-eared barley, firing as they ran. The infuriated Shaldiba (Morozka recognized him by his black horse and the pointed crown of his hat of badger fur) lashed his whip right and left but could not halt his running men. Morozka could see some of them stealthily tearing off their red ribbons.

"The bloody swine! What do they think they're doing? What are they doing?" Morozka muttered, getting more and more excited because of the firing.

In the last group of the panic-stricken men a slight young fellow, his head tied up in a white kerchief, wearing a short city jacket, limped along, trailing his rifle clumsily. The rest of the group, it seemed, were running slowly so as not to leave him behind. The group was thinning rapidly, and the young fellow with the white kerchief also fell. He was not dead, however; he tried to get up and crawl along; he stretched out his arms and shouted something.

The men ran faster, without looking back, leaving him behind.

"The bloody bastards! What are they doing?" Morozka exclaimed again, his sweating fingers nervously clutching his carbine.

"Mishka! Come here!" he shouted in a voice that was not his own.

With a soft neigh, its nostrils dilated, the colt, scratched and bleeding, bounded up to the hill-top.

In a few seconds, stretched out like a bird in flight, Morozka was flying over the field of barley. With fierce hisses, fiery leaden gadflies zipped over his head; the horse's back seemed to drop into an abyss; the barley whistled under his feet.

"Lie down!" Morozka yelled, throwing the reins on one side and fiercely digging one of his spurs into Mishka's side.

Mishka did not want to lie down under the bullets and pranced on all fours round the sprawling groaning young fellow with the white blood-stained kerchief on his head.

"Down!" Morozka shouted hoarsely, tearing the horse's lips with a tug at the bit.

Bending his trembling knees, Mishka sank to the ground.

"It hurts . . . it hurts . . ." the wounded boy moaned as the orderly tossed him across the saddle. The boy's face was white, beardless, and clean, although it was streaked with blood.

"Shut up, you slobberer!" Morozka hissed.

In a few minutes, letting the reins fall and supporting his burden with both arms, he galloped round the hill to the village where Levinson's company was stationed.





II. METCHIK

Truth to tell, Morozka did not like the looks of the boy whose life he had saved.

Morozka had no love for nice, clean people. He knew them to be uncertain, good-for-nothing, untrustworthy creatures. Besides, from the first the wounded lad had shown little grit.

"Milksop!" the orderly muttered through set teeth, when the unconscious boy was laid on a bed in the hut of Ryabets. "A scratch made him go to pieces."

Morozka wanted to say something very sarcastic but the right words wouldn't come.

"Snotty nose, like all of them..." he grumbled in exasperation.

"Stop your chatter!" Levinson cut in roughly. "Baklanov! Take this lad to the hospital soon as it's dark."

The boy's wounds were dressed. In the side pocket of his jacket they found a little money, papers (name—Pavel Metchik), a bundle of letters, and the photograph of a young girl.

Some two dozen men, gloomy, unshaven, black with sunburn, took turns in examining the girl's gentle face and fair curls, and then the picture, amid an awkward silence, was put back in its place. The wounded boy lay unconscious, his lips immobile and bloodless, his hands stretched out lifelessly on the blanket.

He did not feel them carry him in a jolting cart out of the village in that sweltering dove-grey evening; he came to when they put him on a stretcher. His first sensation of the smooth swaying movement blended with the vision, equally faint, of a starry sky straight before his eyes. From all sides the furry eyeless darkness pressed in; he caught the keen and pungent smell of pine needles and rotting leaves; they smelled as though they were steeped in alcohol.

A feeling of tender gratitude welled up in him to the men who were carrying him so gently and with such care. He wanted to talk to them; he moved his lips, but before he could say anything he swooned again.

When he came to once more, it was day already. A voluptuous and lazy sun was melting in the smoking branches of a cedar. Metchik was lying on a bunk in the shade. On his right stood a tall, rigid man in a grey hospital smock, and on his left a serene and soft feminine figure bent over the bed, her heavy golden-russet plaits hanging over her shoulder.

What first struck Metchik—what came from the quiet figure, from her large misty eyes, fluffy plaits, and her warm brown hands—was the sense of kindness and tenderness, almost boundless, free for all and all-embracing.

"Where am I?" Metchik asked softly.

The tall, rigid man stretched out a dry, bony hand and felt his pulse.

"It'll do," he said calmly. "Varya, get everything ready for the dressing, and call Kharchenko...." He was silent for a while and then added, rather superfluously, "... at the same time."

Metchik painfully lifted his eyelids and gazed at the speaker. The man had a long yellow face with sunken glittering eyes. They looked down indifferently at him, and one eye winked unexpectedly and humourlessly.

It hurt a lot when the coarse gauze was stuffed into the healing wounds, but Metchik did not cry out, soothed by the gentle, caressing touch of the woman's hands.

"Good," the tall man said, finishing the dressing. "Three real holes, but just a scratch on the head. They'll heal in a month's time, or else my name isn't Stashinsky." He became a little more lively and his fingers moved more quickly, but his eyes still had that sorrowful gleam, and the right eye blinked without expression.

They washed Metchik's face and hands. When that was over he raised himself on his elbows and looked around.

Some people were bustling near the log barracks; blue smoke billowed out from the chimney; on the roof the resin caught the sun. A large black-beaked woodpecker hammered with a businesslike air at the edge of the wood. Leaning on a staff, an old quiet man with a fair beard, wearing a hospital smock, looked about with kindly eyes.

Over the old man, over the barracks, over Metchik, floated the sated silence of the taiga, steeped in the smell of resin.

About three weeks ago, walking from the town with an official mandate in his boot and a revolver in his pocket, Metchik had only a vague idea of what lay before him.

Cheerily he whistled a merry city tune; his blood coursed and throbbed in every vein; he was spoiling for action and struggle.

The men in the volcanic hills (known to him only through the newspapers) grew to real-life stature before his eyes, clad in the smoke of gunpowder and heroic deeds. He was full of curiosity, of bold fancies, of sweet and delightful memories of the girl with the fair curls, who still had coffee and biscuits in the morning, and then, her text-books in their blue paper covers strapped together, hurried off to school.

As he was nearing Krilovka, several men jumped out from the bushes with their Berdan rifles atilt.

"Who're you?" demanded a hatchet-faced fellow in a sailor's cap.

"I'm . . . I've been sent from town. . . ."

"Papers?"

He had to pull off his boot to get his mandate.

"Mari-time . . . Region-al Committee . . . Socialist . . . Rev-o-lu-tion-aries," the sailor read out in syllables, from time to time glancing up at Metchik with eyes as sharp as thistles. "So-o . . ." he drawled meaninglessly.

Of a sudden, the blood rushed to his face, he seized Metchik by the lapels of his coat and yelled in a taut, shrill voice:

"Why, you son of a bitch! . . ."

"What? What?" Metchik mumbled in confusion. "But that's from the Maximalists. Read it, Comrade!"

"Search him!"

A few minutes later, Metchik, bruised and disarmed, was pushed in the presence of a man, wearing a pointed hat of badger fur, whose black eyes burned through him to the soles of his feet.

"They didn't understand," said Metchik, sobbing nervously and stammering. "It's written there—from the Maximalists. . . ."

"Give me his papers!"

The man in the pointed hat fixed his eyes on the mandate. Under his burning glance the crumpled paper positively smoked. Then he turned his eyes to the sailor.

"You idiot!" he said sternly. "Can't you see it says Maximalists?"

"There, you see!" Metchik breathed joyfully. "I told you so—from the Maximalists! That makes it different, doesn't it?"

"So we worked him over for nothing!" the sailor said, disappointed. "That's funny."

From that day Metchik enjoyed the full rights of a member of the detachment.

The people around him were not at all like those created by his ardent imagination. They were dirtier, lousier, tougher, and simpler. They swiped cartridges from one another, swore furiously over every trifle, and fought wildly for a piece of bacon. They abused Metchik on the slightest pretext: for his city jacket, his correct speech, his not knowing how to clean his rifle, even for his unwillingness to eat more than a pound of bread at dinner.

But for all that they were not people in books, but real, live people.

Now, lying in a peaceful glade in the taiga, Metchik lived through it all again. Now he regretted the naive but sincere feeling with which he had come to the company. He responded with a special, painful keenness to the care and affection of those about him, and to the sleepy stillness of the taiga.

The hospital stood at the confluence of two streams. At the edge of the forest, where the woodpecker hammered incessantly, black Manchurian maples, tinged with purple, whispered among themselves, and below, at the foot of a slope, the streams, hemmed in by silvery ferns, sang their tireless song. There were few sick and wounded, and only

two severely wounded men—a Suchan partisan named Frolov, with a bullet in his abdomen, and Metchik.

Every morning, when they were carried out of the stuffy barrack hut, the quiet fair-bearded old man Pika came up to Metchik. He made Metchik see an old, forgotten picture: in tranquil stillness, near an ancient, moss-grown hermitage, a quiet and clear-browed old man wearing a calotte sits fishing on the emerald-green bank of a lake. A peaceful sky above the old man's head; fir-trees, peaceful and languorous, all around; the peaceful lake, overgrown with rushes. Peace, dreams, silence....

Was it for this dream that Metchik's soul was yearning?

In a chanting voice, like a village deacon's, Pika told Metchik about his son, a former Red Guard.

"Well, he comes to me, he does. I am sitting in my bee-garden ... where else?... We haven't seen each other for ages, so we kiss, of course. But I see he's got something on his mind. 'Dad,' he says, 'I'm going off to the town, to Chita.' 'Why?' says I. 'Well, Dad,' he says, 'some damned Czechoslovaks have shown up there.' 'But what have the Czechoslovaks got to do with you?' I says. 'You stay here,' I says, 'look what a fine life you'll have here.' And true enough, my bee-garden's just heaven on earth—birches, you know, and limes in blossom, and my little bees buzzing-z-z-z-z...."

Pika would take off his soft black cap and wave it above joyfully.

"And what do you think? He didn't stay! Not him. He went away. And now the Kolehaks have stamped out my bee-garden, and I've no son now. What a life!"

Metchik loved to listen to him. He liked the old man's soft sing-song voice, his slow gestures that seemed to come straight from the soul.

Still more he loved to have the nurse take care of him. She washed and sewed for the whole hospital. One felt in her a boundless love for people, and to Metchik she showed

particular tenderness and consideration. As he got better little by little, he began to see her with earthly eyes. She stooped somewhat, her complexion was pale, and her hands were rather large for a woman, but she walked with a peculiar impetuous and vigorous gait, and her voice always seemed to promise something.

When she sat by his side on the bed, Metchik found it hard to lie still. He would never have confessed such a thing to the girl with the fair curls.

"She's loose, Varya is," said Pika once. "Morozka, her husband, is with the company, and she's carrying on here, the hussy."

Metchik looked in the direction indicated by the old man's wink. The nurse was washing linen in the glade, and Kharchenko, the doctor's assistant, was hovering round her. Every now and then he leaned towards her and made suggestive remarks, and she, forgetting about her work, looked up at him with strange misty eyes. The word "loose" stirred up a sharp curiosity in Metchik.

"And why is she . . . that way?" he asked Pika, trying to cover up his confusion.

"God knows why there's so much love in her. She just can't say no, that's all."

Metchik recalled his first impression of the nurse, and a strange resentment stirred in him.

From that moment he began to watch her more closely. He saw that she really did "carry on" quite a lot with the men—in fact, with everyone who was not an invalid. But after all, she was the only woman in the hospital.

One morning, after she had dressed Metchik's wounds, she began to tidy up his bed.

"Sit with me a little," he said, reddening.

She gave him a long and searching look, the same look she had given Kharchenko that day she had washed the hospital linen.

"You, too. . ." she exclaimed involuntarily, in some surprise.

However, having finished tidying the bed, she sat down beside him.

"Do you like Kharchenko?" Metchik asked.

It seemed she did not hear the question and answered her own thoughts, fascinating Metchik with her large misty eyes:

"So young, too." Then, recollecting herself, she added, "Kharchenko? He's all right. You men are all alike."

From under his pillow Metchik drew out a small bundle wrapped in newsprint. The girl's familiar face looked up at him from the faded photograph, but this time it did not seem as charming to him as before; her expression was strange, her gaiety affected, and although Metchik was afraid to confess it to himself, he could not understand why he had thought so much about her. Not knowing why he did so, nor whether it was the right thing to do, he offered the nurse the photograph of the girl with the fair curls.

The nurse studied it, closely at first, then at arm's length. Suddenly she dropped the picture with a cry, jumped up from the bed, and threw a startled look over her shoulder.

"That's a pretty whore!" a hoarse, mocking voice said from behind a maple-tree.

Metchik glanced furtively in that direction and saw a strangely familiar face with an unruly, rusty lock of hair hanging from under a cap and mocking greenish-brown eyes, whose expression, he remembered, had been quite different once.

"Well, why did you get frightened?" the hoarse voice went on calmly. "I didn't mean you, I meant that picture of yours. I've laid many women, but none of them's ever given me a photo. Maybe you'll give me one some day."

Varya recovered and burst out laughing.

"You've given me a fright!" she said in a voice not at all like her own—in a sing-song wisely voice. "Where did you spring from, you hairy ape?" Then, turning to Metchik, she added, "That's Morozka, my husband. He's a joker, he is...."

"Oh, we know each other . . . a little," the orderly drawled, putting a sarcastic emphasis on the word "little."

Metchik lay as though stunned, unable to say anything, hurt and ashamed. Varya had already forgotten about the photograph and, while talking with her husband, she stepped upon it. Metchik was ashamed to ask them to pick it up.

And when the pair went off into the taiga, he hobbled over to retrieve the trampled photograph, clenching his teeth because of the pain in his legs, and tore it to pieces.





III. THE SIXTH SENSE

Morozka and Varya returned late after midday, hiding their eyes from each other, tired and languid.

Morozka came out into the glade and, looking like a brigand, stuck two fingers in his mouth and gave three shrill whistles. And when—just as in a fairy-tale—a shaggy colt with ringing hoofs leaped from the thicket, Metchik remembered where he had seen them both.

"Good old Mishka, you son of a bitch, it was a long wait, wasn't it?" the orderly growled in affectionate tones.

Riding past Metchik, he favoured him with a cunning grin. Later on, when he was bobbing up and down the slopes of the shady green ravines, Morozka's thoughts returned more than once to Metchik. "Why the hell do people like him join

up with us?" he thought, angered and perplexed. "When we began there was nobody, and now that we've got things going, they're all wanting to join up."

It seemed to him that Metchik had actually waited for them to "get things going" before he joined them, although, in point of fact, they still had a long and hard road before them. "A milksop like that shows up, then he goes to pieces and we've got to pay for it.... What did that fool woman of mine see in him?"

He also reflected that life was becoming more and more complicated: the old Suchan paths had grown over and he had to blaze a new road for himself.

Morozka was so preoccupied with his heavy thoughts that he did not notice he had reached the plain. The village folk were in the middle of another day of hard work; their scythes rang out in the scented knot-grass, in the wild, curly clover. The men, their beards as curly as the clover, wearing long shirts soaked with sweat, walked with measured step, bending their legs, and the sweet-smelling, languid grass fell rustling at their feet.

Catching sight of the armed rider, they unhurriedly stopped their work and, shading their eyes with their horny hands, looked after him for a long time.

"Just like a candle!" they said, admiring Morozka's carriage, when, raising himself in the stirrups, his upright body bent slightly towards his saddle bow, he cantered along hardly wavering, like the flame of a candle.

Beyond a bend in the river, near the melon fields of Homa Ryabets, the village chairman, Morozka reined in his horse. The field had a neglected look; when a peasant is occupied with the affairs of community, his melon field grows over with weeds, his grandfather's hut falls to pieces, the pot-bellied musk melons ripen slowly in the fragrant wormwood, and the scarecrow looks like a dying bird.

Throwing guilty glances about him, Morozka turned his horse towards the ramshackle hut. He shot a cautious look inside. The hut was empty. On its floor were strewn rags,

a rusty, broken scythe, the dry parings of cucumbers and melons. Untying a sack from his saddle, Morozka sprang down and began to crawl over the beds. Feverishly tearing off the stems, he stuffed the musk melons into his sack; some of them he gobbled up on the spot, breaking them open against his knee.

Mishka, waving his tail, looked at his master with a sly, knowing eye. Suddenly, hearing a suspicious sound, he pricked up his shaggy ears and turned his ruffled head sharply towards the river. From an osier grove a large, long-bearded, bony old man, wearing linen pants and a hat of coarse brown felt, emerged on the river bank. He was clutching at a net, in which an enormous fish with flat gills was struggling in the agony of death. Its cold diluted blood dripped down on the linen pants, streaking them crimson.

In the hulking figure of Homa Ryabets Mishka recognized the master of the bay mare with the large hindquarters, near which, separated from her by a plank wall, he had fed and slept in the same stable, and to which he had felt drawn by a tormenting desire. His ears cocked in a salute, he raised his head and neighed stupidly with joy.

Morozka jumped up, terrified, clutching the sack with both hands.

"What are you doing there?" Ryabets demanded in a hurt, trembling voice, fixing an unbearably stern and reproachful eye on Morozka. He did not loosen his hold of the furiously shaking net; the fish struggling at his feet beat as tumultuously as his heart, oppressed with all the wrathful words rising in him.

Morozka dropped the sack and, his head pulled in between his shoulders, dashed to his horse. He was already in the saddle when he realized that he should have shaken out the melons and taken the sack away with him, so as to leave no telltale clues. But realizing that it was too late for that, he dug his heels into the sides of the colt and streaked down the road at a mad, dusty gallop.



"You wait! You'll answer for that! You'll answer!" Ryabets shouted, harping on the last word, still unable to believe that the man he had fed and clothed for a whole month as though he had been his own son had tried to steal his melons, and that at a time when his fields were being smothered with weeds because their owner was working for the whole village.

In the shade of Ryabets's little garden Levinson had spread out an old map on a small round table and was questioning a scout who had just returned.

The scout, wearing a quilted peasant overcoat and bast shoes, had penetrated into the heart of the Japanese positions. His round face, burnt red by the sun, glowed with the joyful excitement of a man who has left many perils behind him.

According to the scout, the Japanese headquarters was stationed at Yakovlevka. Two companies had moved from Spassk-Primorsk to Sandagou; on the other hand, the Sviyagino spur-line had been evacuated, so that the scout had gone by train as far as Shabanovsky Springs with two armed partisans from Shaldiba's company.

"Where has Shaldiba retreated to?"

"To the Korean farms."

The scout tried to locate the farms on the map, but that was not an easy thing for him to do, and since he did not wish to be thought inefficient, he poked a casual finger into a neighbouring district.

"They got a good beating at Krilovka," he went on unconcernedly, snuffling. "Now half of their fellows have returned to their villages and Shaldiba's wintering on a Korean farm and stuffing himself with *chumiza*. They say he drinks a lot, too. Man's gone off his rocker completely."

Levinson compared these new items of information with those he had received the day before from a bootlegger named Stirksha and those sent from the town. There was something wrong somewhere. Levinson had a peculiar flair for that sort of thing, a sixth sense, like a bat in the dark,

There was something wrong about the cooperative chairman who had failed to return from Spasskoye these two weeks, about the desertion of several Sandagou peasants, suddenly seized with homesickness the day before yesterday, and finally about the lame smuggler, Li-Fu by name, who had intended to follow the company to Uborka, but had turned off, for unknown reasons, and headed for the upper reaches of the River Fudzin.

Levinson began his interrogation over and over again, studying the map all the while. He had a rare patience and doggedness, like an old wolf of the taiga which, perhaps, has lost many of its teeth, but which still compels its pack to follow its lead by the sheer force of indomitable wisdom inherited from past generations.

"Well, but didn't you smell something special in the air?"

The scout stared at him uncomprehendingly.

"With your nose!" Levinson exclaimed, drawing together his fingers as if for a pinch of salt and bringing them up to his nose.

"No, I can't say I did. That's a fact," the scout replied with a guilty look. "What am I—a dog, or what?" he thought, irritated and perplexed, and his face at once reddened and became as stupid as that of a fishwife in the Sandagou market.

"All right, go along," said Levinson with a wave of his hand, his eyes, blue as deep pools, squinting a little derisively.

Left to himself, he walked thoughtfully about the garden. Stopping by an apple-tree, he spent some time watching a large-headed, sand-coloured beetle bore into the bark, and by some mysterious process of thought he came to the conclusion that the company would be smashed up by the Japanese unless something was done about it before it was too late.

At the gate Levinson met Ryabets and his lieutenant, Baklanov, a stocky lad of nineteen in a khaki tunic, with a Colt at his belt which never remained idle for long.

"What are we going to do about Morozka?" Baklanov shot at him at once, rigidly contracting his brow, his eyes burning like live coals. "He's been stealing melons from Ryabets. How do you like that?"

He swung his arms from Levinson to Ryabets with a bow, as if introducing them to each other. Levinson had not seen his lieutenant in such a state of excitement for a long time.

"Now, don't shout!" he said in a calm persuasive tone. "There's no need to shout. How did it happen?"

With shaking hands, Ryabets held out the telltale sack.

"He's messed up half my field, Comrade Commander—by God, he has! You see, I went to take a look at my nets—first time I could do so in many a day.... I came out of the osier grove...."

He went on and on, stating his case and stressing the fact that, working as he did for the community, he had been forced to neglect his own farm.

"My women, you know, instead of weeding my melon field, as on the other farms, are breaking their backs in the common hayfields."

Having heard him out with patient attention, Levinson sent for Morozka.

Morozka strutted up with his cap set rakishly on the back of his head, wearing the haughty and insolent air he always affected when he knew himself to be in the wrong but was determined to lie and bluster it out.

"Is this your sack?" the commander asked, his piercing eyes taking in the whole of Morozka.

"That's right."

"Baklanov, take his revolver from him!"

"What? Was it you gave it to me?"

Morozka jumped aside and unfastened the holster.

"Cut it out, now!" Baklanov snapped firmly and harshly, his brow contracting.

All the bluster and insolence fell away from Morozka as soon as they relieved him of his revolver.

"Well, how many of those melons did I take? Why make such a fuss, Ryabets? I swear by God, the damn thing isn't worth talking about...."

Ryabets, his head bowed patiently, wriggled his dusty toes.

Levinson gave orders that the village council should meet that evening together with the company to look into Morozka's doings.

"Let everybody hear about him!"

"Osip Abramich," Morozka rumbled in a hollow, gloomy voice, "all right—let it be the company, but why call in the peasants?"

"Listen, my friend," said Levinson, addressing Ryabets and paying no attention to Morozka, "I must talk to you confidentially...."

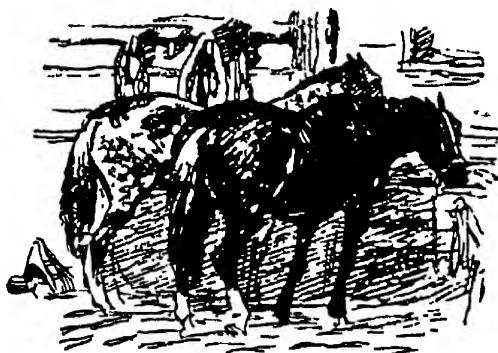
He took the village chairman by the elbow and, drawing him aside, asked him to collect in the village within two days enough bread to make ten poods of rusks.

"But make sure nobody knows why and for whom."

Morozka realized that he was wanted no longer and shuffled off to the guard-house with a hang-dog air.

Left alone with Baklanov, Levinson ordered him to increase the horses' ration of oats from the following day.

"Tell the quartermaster to give them a full bucket each."





IV. ALONE

M orozka's visit disturbed the peace of mind which Metchik owed to the smooth, tranquil round of hospital life.

"Why did he look at me with contempt?" Metchik wondered when the orderly rode off. "I admit he pulled me out of a tight corner, but does that give him the right to sneer at me? And that's the way they all act...." He looked at his delicate, emaciated fingers, at his legs, fettered by the splints, under the blanket; and the old grievances he had tried hard to repress blazed up in him with new force, and his heart ached with pain and distress.

From the moment the hatchet-faced man with eyes as sharp as thistles had seized him roughly and unceremoniously by the collar, all who approached Metchik did so with

a sneer, not with an offer of assistance; none wanted to know his grievances. Even in the hospital, where the hushed taiga breathed love and peace, people were kind to him only out of a sense of duty. And the most bitter and painful thing of all was being so isolated after his blood had been spilt in that field of barley.

He wanted to talk to Pika, but the old man, his smock spread out under him, his head pillowed on his soft cap, dozed peacefully under a tree at the edge of the taiga. The round shining bald patch on his head was surrounded, as with a halo, with transparent silvery wisps of hair. Two lads—one with a bandaged arm, the other limping on one foot—came out of the taiga. They stopped near the old man and exchanged roguish winks. The limping lad found a straw and, raising his eyebrows and grimacing as though he was about to sneeze, tickled Pika's nose with it. Pika mumbled sleepily, twitched his nose, waved his hand, and at last sneezed loudly to everybody's delight. Both lads spluttered with laughter and, crouching low and looking over their shoulder like mischievous boys, ran towards the barrack hut—one carefully supporting his arm, the other skipping with a guilty air.

"Hi, you grave-digger!" the first one shouted, when he saw Kharchenko sitting beside Varya on a bench in front of the hut. "What do you mean pawing our women? Now, now, let me see how soft she is," he purred in an oily voice, sitting down by the nurse and embracing her with his sound arm. "We love you; you're the only woman we've got. Send that dirty mug away, pack him off to his—— mother, tell him to go to hell!" With the same arm he tried to push Kharchenko away, but the doctor's assistant pressed closely against Varya from the other side, baring his even teeth, yellowed with Manchurian tobacco, in a wide grin.

"And what about poor little me?" the limping lad whined nasally. "There's no justice, no truth in the world. Who's going to show the consideration due to a wounded man? What do you say to that, Comrades, dear Citizens?" he

rattled on, blinking his moist eyelids and gesticulating grotesquely with his hands.

His friend kicked at him to keep him away; the doctor's assistant laughed in an unnaturally loud voice and slipped his hand under Viarya's blouse. She looked at the three meekly and wearily, without even attempting to remove Kharchenko's hand. Then, suddenly catching sight of Metchik's dumbfounded stare, she leaped to her feet, rearranged her blouse, and reddened the colour of peony.

"You billy-goats, crawling like flies on honey!" she burst out furiously and, her head bowed, fled into the hut. Her skirt caught in the door. She pulled it out angrily and slammed the door so hard that moss fell from the cracks.

"There's a nurse for you!" the limping youth sang out. He grimaced as though he had taken a pinch of snuff and sniggered softly and obscenely.

All this time, lying on a bed with four mattresses under a maple-tree, his yellow face, ravaged by suffering, up-turned to the sky, the wounded partisan Frolov looked on with aloof, unsmiling eyes. His look was dull and vacant, like a dead man's. Frolov's wound was mortal; he himself had known that from the moment when, convulsed with the deadly pain in his stomach, he had first caught sight of an overturned, immaterial sky. Metchik felt Frolov's unwavering glance upon him, and with a shudder, frightened, he turned his eyes away.

"The lads are at it again..." Frolov said hoarsely, and moved a finger as if he wanted to prove to the world that he was still alive.

Metchik pretended not to have heard.

And although Frolov gave him no more thought, he was afraid for a long time to look in his direction; it seemed to him that the wounded man was still staring at him, his teeth bared in a tight, bony grin.

Bending awkwardly in the doorway, Doctor Stashinsky stepped out from the barrack hut, unbent with a snap like a long jack-knife, and then it seemed strange that he could

stoop at all. He walked with long strides towards the fellows and, forgetting what had brought him there, stopped in surprise, blinking one eye.

"It's hot..." he muttered at length, bending an arm and passing his hand over his cropped head, stroking his hair the wrong way. He had come out with the intention of telling them that they shouldn't pester a person who couldn't be both wife and mother to everybody.

"Is it dull lying here?" he asked Metchik, coming up to him and putting his hot, dry hand on Metchik's forehead.

Metchik was touched by this unexpected kindness.

"Oh, I don't mind it—I'll leave as soon as I'm all right," he said hurriedly; "but you... always in the forest...."

"But if it's got to be that way?"

"What way?" Metchik wondered aloud.

"I mean staying in the forest." Stashinsky took his hand away and looked at Metchik for the first time with genuine human curiosity, his black, shiny eyes fastened upon the others. The eyes were remote and sad, as though overflowing with all the mute loneliness which preys upon a solitary soul during the long nights in the taiga, by the smoking bonfires on the Sikhote-Alin Range.

"I understand," Metchik said in a melancholy voice, and he smiled a sad, friendly smile. "But couldn't you stay in a village? That is... I don't mean you personally," he interrupted the other's surprised question. "I mean the hospital."

"It's safer here. Where do you come from?"

"I'm from the town."

"Been away long?"

"Yes, more than a month."

"Know Kreiselmann?" Stashinsky asked, brightening up.

"Yes... but not very well."

"How is he getting on there? And who else do you know?" The doctor began to blink his eye more rapidly and suddenly sat down on a tree-stump as abruptly as if his knees had been pushed in from behind.

"I know Vonsik, Yefremov..." Metchik began. "Guryev, Frenkel—not the one who wears glasses, I don't know him—but the other one, the short one...."

"But they are all Maximalists!" Stashinsky said, astonished. "How do you happen to know them?"

"Well, I just used to tag after them..." Metchik murmured, getting alarmed.

"So-o-o!" Stashinsky muttered uncertainly, under his breath. "I see..." he added stiffly in a voice which had again become the voice of a stranger. "Well, get better..." he said, rising, not looking at Metchik. He strode off hastily towards the hut as though afraid the other might call him back.

"I know Vasyutina, too!" Metchik shouted after him, clutching at something that seemed to be slipping away.

"Yes, yes..." Stashinsky mumbled, turning his head sideways, but walking even faster.

Metchik realized that he had failed to win the other's sympathy, and he crouched in his bed and flushed painfully.

Suddenly, all his experiences of the last month overwhelmed him. Once again he tried to clutch at something which seemed to be slipping away from him. His lips twitched, his eyes blinked rapidly to hold back the tears, but they welled up and ran thick and fast down his face. He covered his head with his blanket and, letting himself go, wept softly, trying not to sob or shudder for fear that his weakness might be observed.

He wept long and comfortlessly, and his thoughts, like his tears, were salty and bitter. Afterwards, growing calmer, he remained motionless, his head still under the blanket. Varya came up to him several times. He easily recognized her firm footfalls; the nurse walked as though she had vowed to push a loaded waggon in front of her till her dying day. She hesitated a moment by his bed, then left him.

After that Pika shuffled up to him.

"Are you asleep?" he asked in his soft, clear voice.

Metchik pretended to be sleeping. Pika waited for a while.

Metchik could hear the humming of the evening mosquitoes on his blanket.

"All right, sleep away...."

When it became dark Varya and somebody else came up to his bed. Gently lifting the bunk, they carried him into the barrack hut. It was hot and damp inside.

"Go... go after Frolov. I'll be coming back soon," said Varya.

After standing by the bunk for a few seconds she cautiously raised the blanket from his head.

"What's the matter with you, Pavel dear? Are you feeling bad?"

It was the first time she had called him by his first name. Metchik could not make out her face in the darkness, but he was conscious of her presence, conscious, too, that they were alone in the hut.

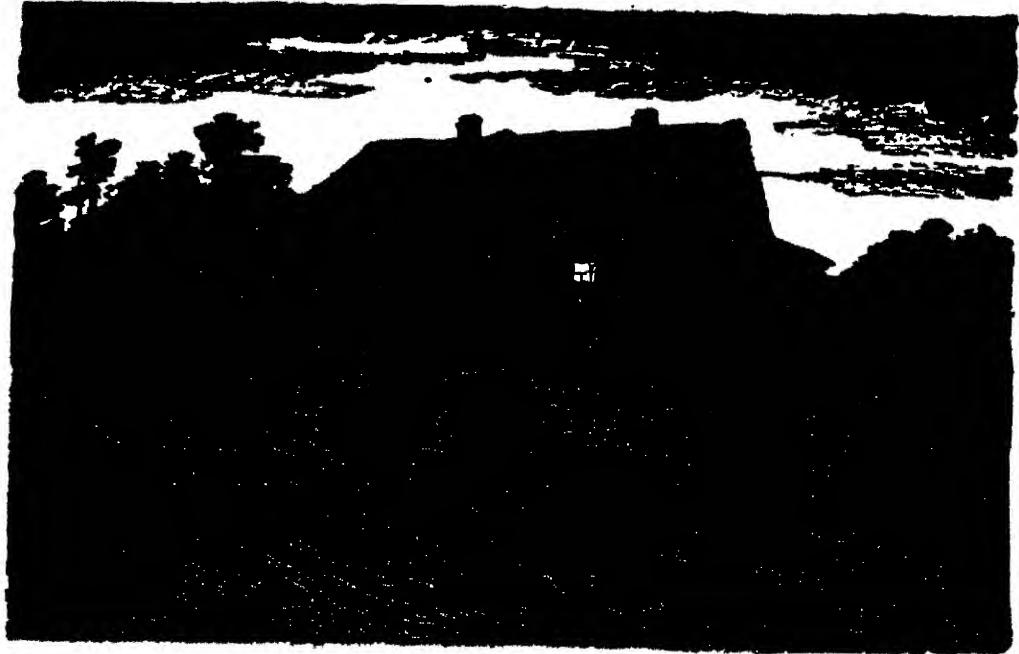
"Yes, I feel rotten," he answered in a low, gloomy voice.

"Do your legs hurt?"

"No, it's not that."

Swiftly she bent down and, pressing her large and soft breasts against him, kissed him on the lips.





V. THE PEASANTS AND THE "COAL-EATERS"

Wishing to put his suspicions to the test, Levinson went to the meeting some time before it was due to begin; he wanted to mix with the peasants to hear what they were saying.

The council was held in the schoolhouse. Not many people were there when Levinson arrived: only a few who had returned early from the fields were sitting on the steps in the evening twilight. Through the open door Ryabets could be seen busying himself with the lamp, fixing the sooty chimney glass.

"Greetings to Osip Abramich!" the peasants said, bowing respectfully and extending their dark, work-hardened fingers to Levinson. He shook hands with them all and sat down unobtrusively on one of the steps.

On the other bank of the river, peasant girls sang discordantly. There was a smell of hay, dewy dust, and the smoke of bonfires. From the ferry-boat on the river came the sound of tired horses stamping their feet. In the warm evening dusk, in the creaking of the loaded carts, in the prolonged lowing of the sated, unmilked cows, the peasant's day of toil was coming to an end.

"Not many here," Ryabets said, appearing on the porch. "And no wonder, too. You can't get many together today—lots of them will sleep in the hayfields."

"Why hold a council on a weekday? Or is it something really urgent?"

"Well, there's something we've got to talk over..." the chairman said hesitantly. "One of their fellows—the one who's billeted with me—has been up to mischief. It's not very important, in a way, but it's been pretty unpleasant." He looked sheepishly at Levinson and was silent.

"If it's not important, why did you call a council?" the peasants demanded in one voice. "At such a time every minute is precious to us."

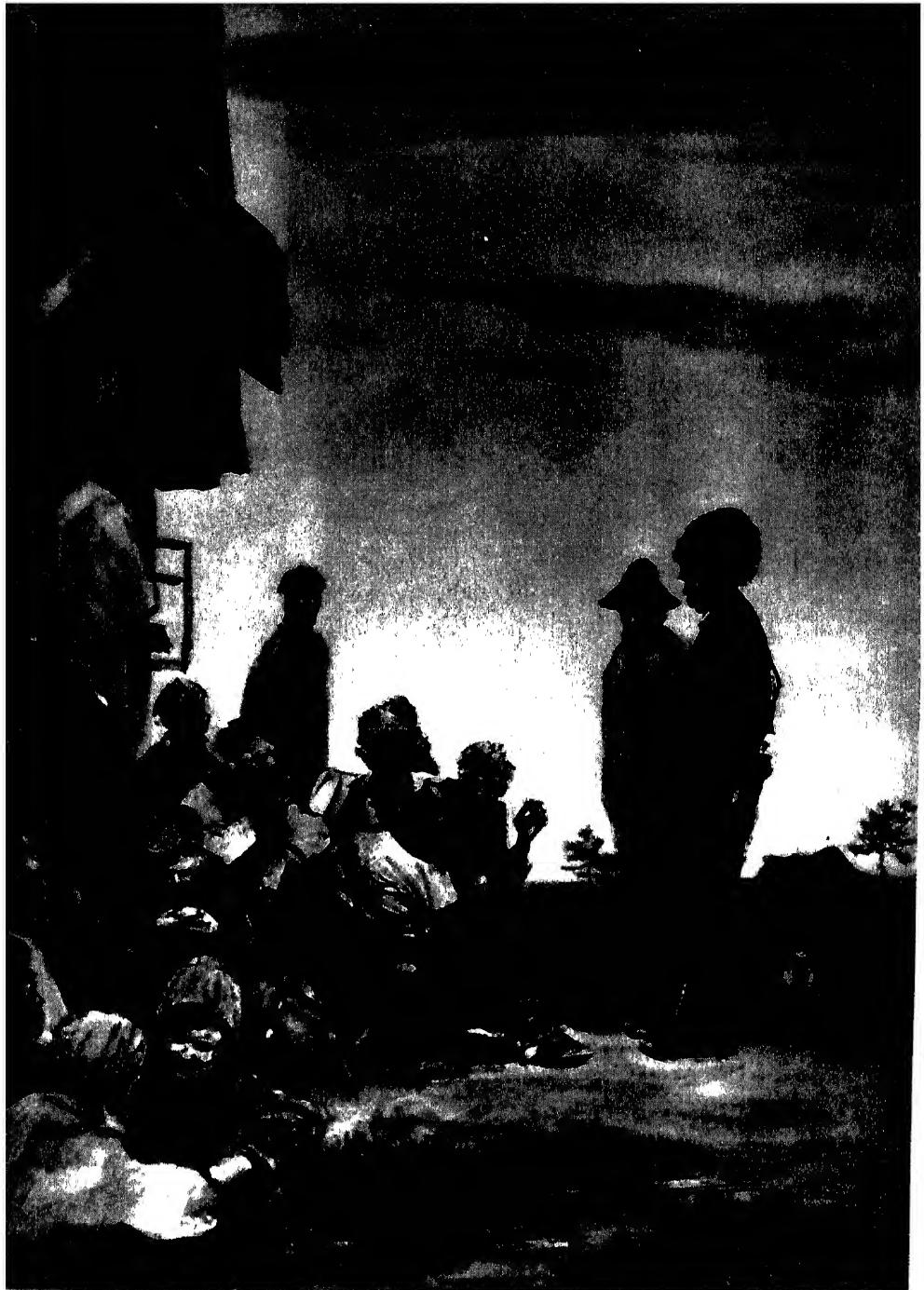
Levinson explained. Then, interrupting one another, they began to put their grievances before him, all of them connected with the haymaking and the shortage of factory-made wares.

"You ought to see what our people have to cut hay with, Osip Abramich. Nobody has a proper scythe, they're all broken and mended. It's not work, it's just plain agony!"

"Semyon—what a beauty of a scythe he ruined the other day! He's always in a hurry, he's a regular work fiend. He goes over the field like a machine and all of a sudden he hits a stone.... Now it's no use mending it...."

"Yes, it was a fine scythe...."

"I wonder how my folk are making out there," Ryabets murmured thoughtfully. "Have they cut it all? The grass this year is lush.... If only they could get the work done by Sunday in the big field!... Yes, this war will cost us the eyes out of our head."



New figures pitched out of the darkness into the trembling circle of light. Some came straight from the fields, carrying bundles, wearing long, dirty white blouses. They brought with them noisy peasant chatter, the smell of tar and sweat and freshly cut grass.

"Good health to you all!..."

"Ho-ho! Ivan? Come to the light and let us see your mug. Look what the bumble-bees did to him. I saw you running away from them, wriggling your back-side...."

"What do you mean, you scoundrel, by cutting the grass on my field?"

"Your field! What rot! I didn't go an inch beyond the boundary. We don't need what doesn't belong to us—we've got enough of our own."

"We know you!... Enough of their own, he says! We can't drive your pigs out of our garden. They'll litter in my melon field next. Enough of their own!"

Someone, tall, round-shouldered, bony, with one eye shining in the darkness, loomed above the crowd.

"The Japs," he said, "reached Sunduga the day before yesterday—so the Chuguyevka fellows say. They came, took over the schoolhouse, and at once began pestering the women. 'Russian rady, Russian rady....' The bastards!" He spat out with hatred, swinging his arm sharply as if he were chopping wood.

"They'll come here, sure enough!..."

"Why should such a thing happen to us!"

"There's no peace for us peasants...."

"The peasants always get the worst of it. If only the war would finish, one way or the other."

"The main thing is that there's no way out. We've got no choice—it's either the grave or the coffin for us."

Levinson listened in silence. They had forgotten about him. He was so small, so insignificant—just a hat, a reddish beard, and fur boots reaching above the knees. But listening to the discordant voices of the peasants, Levinson

heard in them an unmistakable note of alarm, which he alone could detect.

"Things look pretty bad," he kept saying to himself. "Very bad. Tomorrow at the latest I must write to Stashinsky—tell him to hide the wounded wherever he can. We must lie low for a while, disappear altogether.... We ought to strengthen the pickets...."

"Baklanov!" he called to his lieutenant. "Come here for a minute. You see.... Sit closer. I think we ought to have more than one sentry at the cattle-shed. We must also send out a mounted picket as far as Krilovka, particularly at night. We've grown too slack...."

"What's up?" Baklanov asked in alarm. "Is there any sign of trouble—or what?" He turned his clean-shaven head towards Levinson, and his eyes, oblique and narrow like a Tatar's, were anxious and watchful.

"In wartime, my dear fellow, there's always trouble," said Levinson in a tone at once affectionate and biting. "War, dear chap, isn't exactly the same thing as lying in a haystack with Marusya." He tittered, unexpectedly, merrily, and nudged Baklanov in the ribs.

"You're a clever one, you are!" Baklanov rejoined, seizing Levinson's hand, and at once became boisterous, merry, and good-humoured. "Don't wriggle—you won't get away," he growled playfully through his teeth, twisting the other's arm behind his back and pushing him against the stair-post.

"Go away. There—Marusya's calling you," Levinson lied blandly. "Let go, you devil! You can't behave like that at a meeting."

"Thank your lucky star for that, or I'd show you...."

"Go away. There's your Marusya!"

"One sentry, did you say?" Baklanov asked, getting up. Levinson followed him with smiling eyes.

"Your lieutenant's a brick," someone said to him. "He doesn't drink, doesn't smoke, and the main thing is he's young. The day before yesterday he comes to my hut to ask for a horse's collar. 'Well,' I says, 'would you like a glass

of vodka with pepper?' 'No,' he says, 'I don't drink, but if you want to treat me, just give me some milk. I'm a great one,' he says, 'for milk.' And he drinks it, you know, out of a bowl, like a baby, throwing pieces of bread in. Yes, he's a fine fellow!"

More and more partisans appeared among the crowd, the muzzles of their rifles gleaming. They arrived in good time and in a body. Then came the miners, led by Timofei Dubov, a big coal-hewer from Suchan, now a platoon commander. They, too, flowed into the crowd, a compact, cohesive mass that did not break up. Only Morozka sat apart with a downcast air on a bench by the wall.

"Ah, you're here, too?" Dubov boomed joyfully as he caught sight of Levinson, as if he had not seen him for years and this were the last place he had expected to see him in. "What has that miner friend of ours been up to?" he asked in a slow, thick drawl, holding out to Levinson an enormous grimy hand. "Punish him, teach him a lesson so that the others don't take after him," he boomed again, when Levinson began to explain.

"We should have rapped Morozka on the knuckles a long time ago; he's a blot on the good name of the company," put in a sweet-voiced young man, wearing a student's cap and well-polished boots, who went by the nickname of Siskin.

"Nobody asked for your opinion," Dubov cut him short, without giving him a glance.

The fellow pursed his lips, hurt but trying to look tough; but observing Levinson's mocking eyes on him, he corkscrewed his way into the crowd.

"Did you see that worm?" the platoon commander asked sourly. "What d'you want him for in the company? They say he himself was chucked out of college for stealing."

"Don't believe every rumour you hear," said Levinson.

"Well, it's time to go inside," Ryabets called from the porch, gesticulating in an embarrassed manner, finding it hard to believe that the little incident on his weedy melon field could bring so many people together. "It's about time

we began, Comrade Commander.... We can't waste time here until the cock crows...."

It became hot in the room and full of greenish tobacco smoke. There were not enough benches, and the peasants and partisans, mingling, packed between them and in the doorway, breathing down Levinson's neck.

"Begin, Osip Abramich," Ryabets said gloomily. He was annoyed both with himself and the commander: the whole affair seemed a worthless and unnecessary fuss to him now.

Sulky and glowering, Morozka squeezed through the doorway and stood next to Dubov.

Levinson stressed the fact that he would never have dragged the peasants from their work had he not believed that the matter concerned everybody, affected both them and the partisans, and besides there were many local people in the company.

"The decision rests with you," he concluded, laying heavy emphasis on his words, imitating the peasants' manner of talking. He slowly seated himself on the bench, sat back, and at once became small and insignificant, snuffed out like the wick of a candle, leaving the council to settle the affair in darkness.

Several men began talking at the same time, all of them confused and uncertain, stumbling over irrelevant and trifling facts; then others pitched in; and soon it was impossible to understand what was being said. Most of the speakers were peasants; the partisans bided their time.

"No, it isn't right," an old man, Yevstafy, grey-haired and as wrinkled as lichen, mumbled in a severe voice. "In the old days, in the time of Tsar Nikolai, they'd have led you down the village for such things. They'd have hung what he stole on him and dragged him along, beating frying pans." He wagged a withered finger, as if admonishing someone.

"Don't you bring up Nikolai's times!" shouted the round-shouldered, one-eyed man. He wanted to wave his arms about, but there was not enough room for that and

he grew even angrier than before. "All you know is your tsar! Those days are gone, and good riddance!"

"Tsar or no tsar, but it isn't right all the same," the old granddad repeated stubbornly. "Anyhow we've got to feed the whole band of them, and we can't breed thieves here."

"Who says breed them? Nobody's sticking up for thieves. Maybe you're the one who's been breeding them," said the one-eyed man, hinting at the old man's son, who had been missing for the past ten years. "We've got to work out a new rule. The lad's been fighting these six years—what if he did take a fancy to a melon?"

"But why did he have to do it on the sly?" another wanted to know. "And—God—such a worthless thing as a melon, too! If he'd come and asked me, I'd have given him a pailful and thought nothing of it. Take them . . . we feed the pigs with them, so why grudge such dung to a good man!"

There was no anger in the peasants' voices. The majority agreed that the old laws did not hold good any longer and the matter had to be dealt with in a new way.

"Let them and the chairman settle it among themselves," someone shouted. "We'll keep out of it."

Levinson rose again and rapped on the table.

"Now, one at a time, Comrades!" he said softly but distinctly, so that they all heard. "If we all talk at the same time, we'll make no headway. Where's Morozka? Come here, now!" he called ominously, and everybody turned to where the orderly stood.

"I'm all right where I am," Morozka said in a gruff voice.

"Get going!" said Dubov, nudging him.

Morozka hesitated. Levinson leaned forward and his unblinking eyes, gripping Morozka, drew him from the crowd like pincers draw a nail from the wall.

With bowed head and downcast eyes, the orderly elbowed his way towards the table. He was sweating hard and his hands were trembling. Conscious now of a hundred curious eyes upon him, he tried to raise his head, but encountered the grim, hairy face of Goncharenko. The demolition man's

expression was at once sympathetic and severe. Morozka could not face it; he turned to the window and stood motionless, his eyes fixed on the dark emptiness outside.

"Now let's settle this thing," Levinson said, his voice still uncommonly quiet, although it reached everybody, even those on the porch. "Who wants to speak? You, Granddad?"

"Why should I speak?" Yevstafy replied in confusion. "We were just talking among ourselves...."

"There's nothing much to talk about. Settle it yourselves," the peasants shouted.

"Wait, old man—let me speak!" Dubov burst out suddenly, restrained passion in his voice. He was looking at Granddad Yevstafy, and therefore he unwittingly called Levinson "old man." There was something in his tone which made everybody start and turn their heads in his direction.

He squeezed through the crowd towards the table and stood near Morozka, his broad, heavy body concealing Levinson from view.

"You want us to settle it ourselves? Are you yellow?!" he burst out fiercely, leaning forward abruptly. "All right, then, we'll settle it ourselves!" He swung sharply about to Morozka and bored into him with burning eyes. "You say you're one of us—a miner?" he demanded, taut and biting. "Ah, you mongrel, you Suchan degenerate! You don't want to be one of us? You steal? You've shamed all of us coal-eaters! All right!" Dubov's words shattered the silence with the heavily ringing, metallic sound of falling coal.

Morozka, white as a sheet, looked at him, unable to tear his eyes away, and his heart sank.

"All right!" Dubov repeated. "Be a thief. We'll see how you'll manage without us. We... we'll kick him out!" He cut short his speech, turning sharply towards Levinson.

"Who d'you think you're kicking out?" one of the partisans shouted.

"What?!" Dubov roared, taking a step forward.

"For God's sake, take it easy, boys," a nasal, pitiful voice quavered from a corner of the room.

Levinson caught hold of the platoon commander's sleeve from behind.

"Dubov!" he called quietly. "Step aside a bit—I can't see anything...."

Dubov cooled down at once. He hesitated and blinked sheepishly.

"How can we kick the fool out?" Goncharenko suddenly spoke up, raising his curly, sun-bleached head above the crowd. "I don't mean to defend him—that can't be done. The fellow's gone and done a dirty thing. What's more, I keep hollering at him every day. But you've got to hand it to him—he's a good partisan when it comes to fighting. We fought together at the Ussuri front. He's one of us—he'll never sell us out."

"One of you fellows!" Dubov broke in bitterly. "And isn't he one of us, too? We worked with him in the same hell of a pit. For nearly three months we've slept under one greatcoat. And now every bloody bastard," he roared, suddenly remembering the sweet-voiced Siskin, "wants to teach us a lesson!"

"I'm coming to that," Goncharenko went on, casting a puzzled glance at Dubov, believing that the latter's remark had been addressed to him. "We can't just forget about the thing, nor can we kick him out—we can't kick out our own people. In my opinion we should ask him himself!" With a cutting gesture of his heavy hand he seemed to separate everything that was unnecessary from his own necessary and just opinion.

"That's right! Let's ask him! Let him tell us, and we'll see whether he's one of us or not...."

Dubov, who had begun to squeeze through the crowd back to his place, stopped in the aisle and stared searchingly at Morozka.

The orderly stared back in confusion, his sweaty fingers plucking nervously at his blouse.

"Let's hear what you've got to say!"

Morozka shot a glance at Levinson out of the tail of his eye.

"Do you really think I'd——" he began and stopped short, unable to find words.

"Go on, go on!" they shouted encouragingly.

"Do you think I'd... do such a...?" Again he could not find words, and he nodded at Ryabets. "Well, those melons. Would I have done it... if I'd only thought.... Was it from cussedness? We got used to stealing when we were children —you know it yourself... and me, too.... And as Dubov said, I've shamed you all. But could I really, brothers?..." These last words came straight from his heart. He leaned forward, his hands clutching his breast, his eyes shining with a warm, moist light.... "Why, I'd give every drop of my blood for any of you, I wouldn't shame you for anything!..."

Alien sounds penetrated into the room from outside: a dog barked somewhere; peasant girls were singing; from the priest's house next door came a rhythmic, muffled hammering, as if something was being crushed in a mortar; "Heave!" came a drawn-out cry from the ferry.

"Well, how can I punish myself?" Morozka went on. There was still the same pain in his voice; he spoke more firmly now but less sincerely. "I can only give you my miner's word—I'd never go back on it...."

"And if you do go back on your word?" Levinson asked cautiously.

"I'll keep it." Morozka pulled a wry face, feeling self-conscious in front of the peasants.

"And if you don't?"

"Well, you can do whatever you like then... you can shoot me...."

"Yes, we will shoot you then!" Dubov said harshly, but his eyes shone now not with anger but with affection, and there was a smile in them.

"Well, there's nothing more to say!" the men shouted from the benches.

"That's all there is to it," the peasants said, glad that the

long drawn-out meeting was over. "A worthless business, and enough talk to last a year."

"Is that our decision then? No other proposals?"

"Close the meeting, damn it!" the partisans shouted, no longer tense and silent. "We're sick and tired of the whole thing. We're hungry, too—our bellies are crying for grub!"

"No, wait," said Levinson, raising his hand and screwing up his eyes. "We've settled one question, but there's another."

"What else is there?"

"I think we ought to pass a resolution." He looked about him. "Why, we didn't have a secretary." He laughed shortly and good-humouredly. "Come on, Siskin, take this down: 'Resolved: When there's no military action, instead of just hanging about, assistance shall be given to the peasants, even if it's only a little....'" He spoke so confidently as if he really believed that his men would help the peasants.

"But we don't ask for that!" one of the peasants cried.

"They've fallen for it," Levinson thought.

"Shut up, you!" the other peasants cut the man short. "You'd better listen. Let them work—their hands won't fall off!"

"And we'll see that special help is given to Ryabets...."

"Why special?" the peasants exclaimed excitedly. "Why is he such a big bug? Anyone can be chairman—it's not a hard thing to be one...."

"Enough! Enough! We're willing.... Take it down!"

The partisans got up from their seats and, paying no further attention to their commander, stamped out of the room.

"Hey, Vanya!" a shaggy, sharp-nosed fellow leaped up to Morozka and dragged him to the door, the heels of his boots clattering. "My fine boy, my son, you snotty nose!..." He pushed his cap jauntily to the back of his head and nearly went off into a tap dance on the porch, embracing Morozka with one hand.

"Go on," Morozka said good-naturedly, pushing him away.

Levinson and Baklanov passed by hurriedly.

"Strong as an ox—this Dubov!" Baklanov was spluttering excitedly, gesticulating with his hands. "Wouldn't it be fine to put him up against Goncharenko. Who'd win the fight, do you think?"

Levinson, preoccupied with other thoughts, did not hear him. Their feet sank into the soft damp dust of the road.

Morozka fell behind the others. The last group of the peasants overtook him. They were talking in a quiet, leisurely fashion now, as if returning from work, not from a meeting.

The lighted windows of the huts on the hill-side twinkled invitingly, calling to supper. The river gurgled in the mist with the voices of hundreds of cranes.

"Mishka hasn't had a drink yet," Morozka suddenly recalled, gradually returning to his usual ways.

In the stable, sensing his master, Mishka neighed quietly but angrily, as if asking, "Where the hell have you been?" Morozka groped for the coarse mane in the darkness and led the colt out of the stall.

"Ah, you're glad, too," he said, pushing the horse's head away when it impudently put its moist nostrils against his neck. "All you know is how to play dirty tricks, but I've got to answer for both of us."





VI. LEVINSON

Levinson's company had been resting for more than four weeks and during this time had acquired stud-horses, waggons, and kitchen cauldrons, around which hovered the most tractable of men—ragged deserters from other detachments. The partisans had become lazy and slept a good deal more than was necessary, even on sentry duty.

Levinson hesitated to set this heavy mass in motion just because of the alarming news that had reached him. Fresh facts alternately confirmed and ridiculed his fears. More than once he accused himself of being over-cautious—especially when it became known that the Japanese had marched out of Krilovka and his scouts had been unable to contact the enemy for dozens of miles around.

However, nobody except Stashinsky knew of Levinson's irresolution. Nor could anybody in the company have believed that Levinson was capable of being irresolute; he confided his thoughts and feelings to nobody, was always ready with a short "yes" or "no." In consequence, he seemed to all of them—except to such men as Dubov, Stashinsky, and Goncharenko, who knew his true worth—a man of a special, superior breed. All the partisans, particularly the youthful Baklanov, who tried to resemble the commander even in manners and appearance, were wont to think in this fashion: "Of course, I have a lot of weaknesses, sinner that I am; there's a lot I don't understand; I can't control myself in many things; I've left a warm, loving wife, or bride, at home for whom I long; I like sweet musk melons, or milk with bread, or well-polished boots to win the hearts of village girls at an evening dance. But Levinson—there's a man! You can't suspect *him* of anything like that. He understands everything; he does everything the right way; he doesn't, like Baklanov, run after the girls, doesn't steal melons, like Morozka; he has only one thing in his head—his work. You can't help trusting him, can't help obeying him, for he's a real man!"

From the day Levinson had been elected commander, nobody could imagine him in any other capacity: it seemed to everyone that the distinctive thing about him was the fact that he was in command. If he had told them how, in his childhood, he had helped his father to sell second-hand furniture, how his father had dreamed all his life of becoming rich, and was afraid of mice and played his fiddle rather badly, all of them would have thought it a bad joke. But Levinson never spoke of such things. Not that he was reticent, but because he knew that everybody regarded him as "a man of a special breed," knew his own weaknesses and the weaknesses of others, and believed that one could be a leader of men only if one made the others aware of their weaknesses and suppressed and concealed one's own. Accordingly, he never tried to make fun of young Baklanov

for aping him. When he was Baklanov's age, Levinson himself had imitated his instructors, who had likewise seemed to him as superior as he now seemed to Baklanov. When he grew older he understood that his teachers were not the superior beings he had imagined them to be, but he was nonetheless grateful to them. For Baklanov not only copied his mannerisms, but learned from his whole experience of life—his ways of fighting, working, behaving. And Levinson knew that the mannerisms would vanish with the years, while Levinson's experience, enriched by Baklanov's own, would be passed on to new Levinsons and Baklanovs; and that, he felt, was important and necessary.

At the beginning of August, late one rainy night, a relay dispatch-rider arrived with a message from old Sukhovei-Kovtun, the chief-of-staff of the partisan troops. Old Sukhovei-Kovtun wrote that the Japanese had attacked Anuchino, where the main partisan forces were concentrated, that there had been a fierce battle near Izvestkovaya, that hundreds of partisans had been tortured to death, and that he himself, having received nine bullet wounds, was hiding in a winter hunting-shelter and feared he had not much longer to live.

The rumour of the defeat spread with ominous speed over the plains, but the dispatch-rider was the first to bring the news. Every rider in the relay had felt that the message was more terrible than any other which he had carried since the beginning of the partisan movement. Even their shaggy horses took fright; baring their teeth, they galloped madly from village to village along the muddy, dismal country roads, their hoofs throwing up fountains of mud.

Levinson received the message at half past twelve, and half an hour later the cavalry platoon commanded by the shepherd Metelitsa, leaving Krilovka behind, swiftly spread out fanwise along the obscure footpaths sealing the Sikhote-Alin, carrying the alarm to the detachments of the Sviyagino military sector.

It took Levinson four days to collect information from the various detachments. His mind worked in a tense, groping

way, as if he were expecting to hear more devastating news any minute. But he spoke to people with his usual calm, screwed up his remote blue eyes as mockingly as ever, and teased Baklanov about his affair with "that slattern Marusya." When Siskin, emboldened by sheer terror, demanded on one occasion why he was doing nothing about the matter, Levinson politely tapped the fellow on the forehead and said that it wasn't "any dickybird's business." Levinson's whole attitude was calculated to produce the impression that he understood perfectly how these events had come about, that he knew where they were leading, that there was nothing unusual or terrifying about them, and that he, Levinson, had long ago worked out a safe, infallible plan for their salvation. In point of fact, not only had he no such plan, but he was completely lost, as a schoolboy who has been asked to solve on the spot an equation with a host of unknown factors. He was awaiting news from the town; the partisan Kanunnikov had gone there a week before the arrival of the fateful message.

Kanunnikov returned on the fifth day after its arrival, tired and hungry, his face covered with a bristly beard, but he was the same red-haired and elusive fellow—he was equally incorrigible in both respects.

"There's been a round-up in the town, and Kreiselmann's in prison," he said, producing two letters from his sleeve with the skill of a card-sharper and smiling with his lips alone. He did not feel happy in the least, but he could not speak without smiling. "The Japanese have landed in Vladimiro-Alexandrovskoye and in Olga. All of our people in the area of Suchan have been routed. The whole business is a wash-out! Here, have a smoke," he said, and offered Levinson a gold-tipped cigarette.

Levinson ran his eye over the envelopes, stuffed one into his pocket and opened the other. It confirmed Kanunnikov's report. Behind the official language and the assumed cheerfulness, the bitterness of defeat and helplessness was only too evident.

"Rotten news, eh?" Kanunnikov asked sympathetically.

"So-so. Who wrote this—Sedikh?"

Kanunnikov nodded in affirmation.

"One can see that; he always paragraphs everything he says." Ironically Levinson underscored "Section IV: Current Tasks" with a finger-nail. He sniffed the cigarette. "Foul tobacco, isn't it? Give me a light. You better keep your mouth shut... about the Japanese landing and the rest.... Did you buy me a pipe?" And ignoring Kanunnikov, who began to explain why he had not bought him a pipe, he fixed his eyes afresh on the letter.

The section "Current Tasks" consisted of five paragraphs, four of which seemed impracticable to Levinson. Paragraph Five ran:

"The most important thing now demanded of the partisan leadership and what it is imperative to achieve at all costs is the preservation of small but effective and disciplined fighting units, around which later on...."

"Call Baklanov and the quartermaster!" Levinson shot out.

He put the letter into his field dispatch-case without reading further to find out what would happen to the fighting units "later on." Among a multitude of problems he could clearly see one—"the most important thing." Levinson threw down the dead end of his cigarette and drummed with his fingers on the table. "Preservation of fighting units." He could not grasp the idea: it stayed in his mind in the form of three words written in indelible pencil upon laid paper. Mechanically he fingered the second letter, glanced at the envelope, and remembered that it was from his wife. "That can wait," he thought, putting it away again. "Preservation of fighting u-nits."

When the quartermaster and Baklanov appeared, Levinson already knew what he and the men under his command would do—they would do *everything* to preserve the company as a fighting unit.

"We'll have to leave this place soon," he said. "Is everything shipshape? Speak up, quartermaster!"

"Yes, speak up!" Baklanov echoed and tightened his belt with so solemn and resolute an air as if he had known all the time that events would lead up to this.

"Oh, I'm ready. I won't let anyone down. But what are we going to do about the oats?" The quartermaster launched upon a lengthy story of oats which had got wet, of torn packs, sick horses, of "their not being able to take all the oats"—in short, of such things that showed that he was not ready for anything and considered their departure a dangerous and ridiculous idea. He avoided looking at the commander, grimaced as though in pain, blinking his eyes and clearing his throat, knowing that he was pleading his case in vain.

Levinson buttonholed him and said, "Rot!"

"No, it's true, Osip Abramich. We'd better dig in here."

"Dig in? Here?" Levinson shook his head, as though pitying the quartermaster's stupidity. "And your hair's grey, too! What end do you think with, eh?"

"I—"

"That'll do!" said Levinson, pulling at the other's button. "You must be ready at a moment's notice. Do you understand? Baklanov, see to it." He let go of the button. "Shame on you! Your packs—that's just nonsense." His eyes grew cold, and his hard glance convinced the quartermaster that his packs weren't actually worth talking about.

"Yes, certainly. Well, it's quite clear.... That isn't so important..." he mumbled, prepared to consent now to carrying the oats on his own back at a word from the commander. "What's there to stop us? It can be done in a couple of shakes. We could set out today."

"That's the spirit!" Levinson laughed. "All right, all right, go along!" He gave the quartermaster a gentle shove in the back. "At a minute's notice, mind!"

"He's a clever bastard!" the quartermaster thought, his resentment mixed with admiration.

Towards evening Levinson summoned a council of the staff with the platoon commanders.

The reaction to Levinson's report was a varied one. Dubov sat out the meeting in silence, pulling at his heavy, drooping moustache. It was clear that he would support Levinson in anything he proposed. Strong opposition came from the commander of the second platoon, Kubrak. He was the oldest, the most highly merited, and the unwisest commander in the whole district. No one supported him: Kubrak was a native of Krilovka, and everyone understood that he was concerned more with the fields of his village than with the interests of the detachment.

"Stop, your number's up!" the shepherd Metelitsa interrupted him. "It's time you forgot about your woman's skirts, Uncle Kubrak!" As always he was inflamed by his own words; he banged his fist on the table, and his pock-marked face at once became shiny with sweat. "Here, we'll be finished like chickens—stop, our number's up!" and he began pacing about the room, shuffling his fur boots and knocking the stools about with his whip.

"Take it easy now," Levinson advised him, though secretly he admired the impetuous movements of the man's supple body, hard and flexible as the thong of his whip. The man could not sit still for a moment; he was all fire and movement, and his rapacious eyes burned with an unquenchable thirst for fight and action.

Metelitsa proposed his own plan of retreat, which made it evident that his hot head held no fear of great distances and was not without military cunning.

"He's right! He's got a head on his shoulders," Baklanov exclaimed, admiring, but somewhat jealous of, the bold and independent flight of Metelitsa's imagination. "It isn't so very long since he used to look after the horses, but in a couple of years, you'll see, he'll be our commander!..."

"Metelitsa? Ah, yes... he's worth his weight in gold," Levinson agreed. "Only look out—don't get a swollen head!"

However, taking advantage of a heated discussion in which everyone thought himself cleverer than the rest and refused to listen to the others, Levinson substituted his own plan, which was simpler and safer, for Metelitsa's. He did it so adroitly and unobtrusively that this new proposal, adopted unanimously, was put to the vote as if it had come from Metelitsa.

In his replies to the town and in a letter to Stashinsky, Levinson wrote that in a few days he would move the company to the village of Shibishi, at the source of the Irohedza, and ordered the hospital to remain where it was until further orders.

He finished his work late at night; the paraffin in the lamp was running short. He could hear the cockroaches rustling behind the stove and the snoring of Ryabets in the next hut. He remembered his wife's letter and, having poured more paraffin into the lamp, he began to read it. There was nothing new, nothing pleasant. Still she could find no job; she had sold everything she could and now managed to keep alive thanks to the Workers' Red Cross; the children were suffering from scurvy and anaemia; every line was threaded with a boundless concern for him. Levinson pinched his beard thoughtfully and began to write. At first he was reluctant to stir up the thoughts connected with this side of his life, but gradually he surrendered to his emotions, his face softened; he covered two sheets with his small, scarcely legible handwriting, with many words which no one would have thought were known to Levinson.

Then, stretching his cramped limbs, he went out into the yard. In the stables the horses were stamping and noisily munching grass. The orderly on duty lay fast asleep under an open shed, hugging his rifle. "What if the sentries are also asleep?" Levinson thought. He remained there for a little while and then, overcoming his sleepiness with difficulty, led his horse from the stable. He saddled the colt. The orderly on duty did not awaken. "The son of a bitch!" Levinson cautiously removed the orderly's hat and hid it under



the hay; then, jumping into the saddle, he rode off to visit the night posts.

Keeping close to the bushes, he rode up stealthily to the cattle-shed.

"Who goes there?" the sentry challenged, rattling the bolt of his rifle.

"Friend."

"Levinson? What the hell are you doing here at night?"

"Has the patrol been here?"

"One of them rode out about a quarter of an hour ago."

"All quiet?"

"Quiet so far. Got a smoke?"

Levinson gave the man some of his Manchurian tobacco. Then he forded the river and rode out into the fields.

A dim half-moon peered through a cloud; a clump of pale bushes, weighed down with dew, stepped out of the darkness. The river flowed noisily over the stony shallows, the sound of each ripple over the pebbles quite distinct. Ahead of him, on a hillock, the silhouettes of four riders began to jog. Levinson turned into the bushes and stood still. The men's voices came from quite near. He recognized two of them—two of the patrol.

"Hold on there!" he called out, riding out into the road. The horses shied, snorting. One of them recognized Levinson's colt and neighed softly.

"You nearly gave us a fright!" the rider in front said in a voice he almost succeeded in keeping firm and conversational. "Whoa! You whore!"

"Who's that you've got with you?" Levinson asked, riding up to them.

"Osokin's patrol. The Japanese are in Maryanovka."

"Maryanovka?" Levinson sat up. "Where's Osokin and his company?"

"In Krilovka," said one of the scouts. "We had to retreat: the fighting was terrible, and we couldn't stand our ground. They've sent us here to contact you. Tomorrow we're setting out for the Korean farms." He bent forward heavily in the

saddle, as if crushed by the cruel weight of his own words. "Everything's gone to blazes. We lost forty men. We haven't had so many casualties during the whole summer."

"Are you leaving Krilovka early?" Levinson asked.
"Turn back, I'm going with you."

It was almost day when he returned to the company, haggard, his eyes inflamed, his head heavy with want of sleep.

His talk with Osokin had finally convinced him of the soundness of his decision to get away in good time, covering up the company's traces. The sight of Osokin's detachment was an eloquent argument in favour of this decision: the company had fallen to bits like an old barrel with rotten staves and rusty hoops which had been smashed with a blow of an axe. The men had ceased to obey their commander, wandered aimlessly about the yard, many of them drunk. One man in particular Levinson remembered: dishevelled and skinny, he sat in the square near the road, staring blankly at the ground, and in blind despair he fired bullet after bullet into the grey dawn.

Upon his return, Levinson at once sent off his letters, but did not tell anyone that the company would leave the village that night.





VII. ENEMIES

In the first letter Levinson had sent to Stashinsky the day after the memorable peasants' council, Levinson had confided his fears and suggested that the hospital should be gradually wound up so as to avoid having extra burdens later on. The doctor reread the letter several times, and the fact that he blinked his eye more rapidly than ever and his yellow jaws stood out more prominently made everyone around him begin to feel anxious and uneasy. It was as though Levinson's fears and forebodings rose hissing from the little grey envelope which Stashinsky held in his spare hands, driving off from every blade of grass, from the innermost corners of every man's soul, the peace and tranquillity which had settled there.

The fine weather came to an abrupt end: now the sun peeped out, now it rained; the black Manchurian maples, first to feel the breath of the approaching autumn, soughed mournfully. The old black-beaked woodpecker hammered on the bark with new zest. Pika, consumed with anxiety, became gruff and taciturn. For whole days he wandered in the taiga, returning tired and discontented. When he tried to sew, the thread tangled up and snapped; when he sat down for a game of draughts, he invariably lost. He felt as if he were sipping stagnant, brackish water through a straw. Meanwhile the other inmates were returning to their villages; they tied up their wretched soldier's belongings and sadly took leave of one another. The nurse, having looked over their bandages, kissed her "brothers" a last good-bye, and the men went off, their new bast shoes sinking in the moss as they vanished in the dank mysterious depths of the taiga.

The last man Varya saw off was the limping youth.

"Good-bye, brother," she said, kissing him on the lips. "See, God loves you—he's arranged for fine weather for you. Don't forget us poor folks here...."

"And where is he, this God of yours?" asked the limping youth, smiling sarcastically. "There's no God; by bloody hell, there isn't!..." He wanted to add something else in his usual gay and spicy manner, but instead his face twitched, he waved his hand dejectedly and, turning away, limped along the path, his mess-tin ringing with an ominous sound.

Now only Frolov and Metchik remained of the wounded men. There was also Pika, who was not ill at all, but who was loath to leave. Metchik, in a new shagreen blouse which the nurse had made for him, was sitting up in his bunk, propped up with his pillow and Pika's dressing-gown. He no longer wore a bandage on his head; his hair had grown and fell in thick yellowish curls; the scar on his temple made his face seem older and more serious.

"You also will get better and go away soon," the nurse said sadly.

"Where shall I go?" he asked uncertainly and was himself taken aback by the question. It was the first time he had given thought to the matter, and it brought with it a vague, uneasy and joyless feeling already familiar to him. Metchik grimaced. "I've got nowhere to go," he said harshly.

"What do you mean?" Varya cried, astonished. "Why, you'll go to Levinson and join his company, of course! Can you ride a horse? Ours is a cavalry company. That's all right, you'll learn to ride." She sat down beside him on the bunk and took his hand. Metchik averted his eyes. The thought that sooner or later he would have to go away seemed not only distasteful to him now—it was bitter as gall.

"Don't be afraid!" Varya said, as if she understood his thoughts. "Such a nice, young fellow like you—and so shy.... You are a shy one," she repeated tenderly and, throwing a stealthy glance around, kissed his forehead. There was something motherly in her kiss. "At Shaldiba's it's different, but at Levinson's it's all right..." she whispered hurriedly in his ear, not finishing her words. "Shaldiba's men are mostly peasants, but our men are miners, good fellows, easy to get along with. Come and see me as often as you can."

"And what about Morozka?"

"And what about that girl—the one in the picture?" she questioned in turn, and tittered, sharply leaning back from Metchik because Frolov had turned his head.

"Ah, I've forgotten all about her. I tore the photograph up," he added hastily. "Did you see the bits on the ground?"

"Well, don't worry about Morozka. He's used to it by now. And he carries on himself, too. Don't lose heart. Just come as often as you can. And always stand up for your-

self, don't knuckle under. You mustn't be frightened by our bcys. They only look so fierce—if you put your finger in their mouth, they'll bite it off, of course. But there's nothing really terrible about them—they only seem terrible. You've got to show your teeth, too—that's all."

"Do you show your teeth?"

"I'm a woman; I can get along without that—love is my line. But for a man there's no other way. Only I'm afraid you won't be tough enough," she added thoughtfully. And again bending towards him, she whispered, "Perhaps, that's why I love you—I don't know...."

"It's true, too—I'm not brave at all," Metchik thought, his hands folded under his head and his eyes fixed motionlessly on the sky. "But won't I manage somehow? I must... in some way.... Others manage...." However, there was nothing melancholy about his thoughts now, no sense of sorrow and loneliness. He could regard everything in a detached way, because he was on the road to recovery, his wounds were healing rapidly, his body was becoming stronger and heavier. All this seemed to come from the earth, smelling of ants and of pure alcohol, and from Varya, whose eyes were misty and who spoke straight from a loving heart—this he longed to believe.

"After all, why should I lose heart?" Metchik thought, and it began to seem to him that there really was no cause for dejection. "I must put myself on the same footing with them; I mustn't knuckle under. She is perfectly right there. Men are different here; I must get myself adjusted to them. And I'll do that!" he resolved with an assurance he had never felt before, conscious of what was almost a son's gratitude to Varya for her words and her kind love. "Everything will be different when I go back to the town, nobody will recognize me—I'll be quite a different man."

His thoughts carried him far away—into the radiant days of the future; they were light and airy and melted imperceptibly like the gentle, rosy clouds over the glades of the

taiga. He pictured himself returning together with Varya to the town in a jolting train with open windows, beyond which clouds as gentle and rosy as these would sail above the distant, hazy mountain ranges. The two of them would sit at the window, side by side, very close to each other, Varya murmuring soft words to him, he stroking her head and her plaits, as golden as burning daylight.... The Varya of his dreams bore little resemblance to the round-shouldered cart-pusher from Pit No. 1, since all his thoughts were merely day-dreams.

A few days later a second letter came from the company. It was brought by Morozka. His arrival caused great panic, for he dashed out of the taiga screaming and yelling, rearing his horse and shouting incoherently. All this he did to give vent to his overflowing energy and ... "just for the fun of it."

"Have you gone mad, you devil?" Pika demanded in his chanting voice, shaking with terror. "There's a man dying here"—he nodded at Frolov—"and you come yelling here...."

"Ha! Father Serafim!" Morozka greeted him. "How is my curly-headed little darling?"

"I'm not your father, and my name is Fyodor!" said Pika crossly; he had grown very touchy of late. When he flared up, he made a ludicrous and pitiful sight.

"That's all right, Fedosei, don't blow your top or your curls will fall out.... Humble greetings to my spouse!" Morozka bowed ceremoniously to Varya, doffing his cap and putting it on Pika's head. "That's all right, Fedosei, the cap suits you fine. Only hoist your pants; they're hanging down like a scarecrow's—one might think you're no gentleman!"

"Well, shall we soon have to take to our heels?" Stashinsky asked, tearing open the envelope. "Drop in later on at the barracks for the answer," he said, hiding the letter

from Kharchenko, who, at the risk of his life, was stretching out his neck over the doctor's shoulder.

Varya stood in front of Morozka, fingering her apron, and for the first time feeling a strange uneasiness at meeting her husband.

"Why have you been away such a long time?" she asked at last with simulated indifference.

"You've missed me a lot, haven't you?" he said in a mocking voice, sensing her incomprehensible remoteness from him. "Well, that's all right, you've got a chance to make up for it now, soon as we go into the forest." After a moment of silence he added meaningfully, "To suffer together."

"That's all you think about," she retorted dryly, not looking at him and thinking of Metchik.

"And you?" Morozka waited for her answer, playing with his whip.

"It's nothing new to me, either. It isn't as if we were strangers."

"Shall we go, then?" he said cautiously, without budging from the spot.

She dropped her apron and, throwing back her plaits, led the way along the path, affecting a careless gait and fighting the impulse to look back at Metchik. She knew that he was following her with hurt, pitiful eyes, and that he would never understand, even afterwards, that she was only fulfilling a tedious duty.

She feared that Morozka would suddenly embrace her from behind, but he did not come near her. They walked on in this way for quite a long time, at a distance from each other, neither of them breaking the silence. At last she could bear it no longer; she stopped, turning to him in surprise and expectation. He drew nearer, but still he did not take her.

"You're up to no good, you slut!" he said suddenly, hoarsely and haltingly. "Have you already fallen for somebody?"

"What's that got to do with you?" She lifted her head and boldly looked him straight in the eyes.

Morozka had always known that she carried on with other men during his absence, just as she had done before they were married. In fact, he had known it from the first day of their married life, when he awakened in the morning with a hang-over, among a heap of bodies on the floor, and saw his young and lawfully wedded wife sleeping in the arms of ginger Gerasim, a hewer from Pit No. 4. But then, as later on, his attitude had been one of total indifference. In fact, he had never known family life and had never felt himself a married man. But it hurt to think that his wife could take a man like Metchik for her lover.

"Who is it, I'd like to know?" he asked with exaggerated politeness, sustaining her glance with a careless, ironical smile. He did not want to show he was hurt. "Is it that mother's darling?"

"What if it is?"

"Well, he's all right—nice and clean," Morozka admitted. "He'll taste sweeter to you. Just make some hankies for him to wipe his snotty nose."

"If it's necessary, I'll make some handkerchiefs for him, and I'll wipe his nose—d'you hear? I'll wipe his nose myself!" She thrust her face up to his and burst out passionately, "Don't try to show me how brave and tough you are! What's the good of your being tough if you haven't managed to make a baby these three years? You can only brag. What a hero!"

"How could I make a baby when a whole platoon's been trying to make one for you? Stop your shouting," he cut her short, "or else...."

"Or else—what?" she said challengingly. "Perhaps, you want to beat me up? Well, try it! I'd like to see you do it!"

He raised and lowered his whip in astonishment, as though the idea was an unexpected revelation to him.

"No, I shan't beat you," he said hesitatingly and regretfully, as if still wondering whether it really would not be a good idea to give her a thrashing. "You need it, but you won't catch me beating a woman." There was a note in his voice she had never heard before. "Well, you can live your own life. Perhaps, you'll become a fine lady one day." He turned on his heel and strode back towards the barrack hut, flicking his whip at the forest flowers.

"Hey, wait!" she shouted, overwhelmed with a sudden pity for him. "Vanya!"

"I don't want the gentry's leavings," he lashed out. "They're welcome to mine!"

She was uncertain whether to run after him or not, and decided against it. She waited until he disappeared round the corner, and then, moistening her dry lips, went slowly after him.

Catching sight of Morozka, returning so quickly from the forest (the orderly was swinging his arms wide as he walked, his steps heavy), Metchik realized that Morozka did not "hit it off" with Varya, and that he, Metchik, was the cause. An uneasy joy and an inexplicable feeling of guilt stirred in him, and he was afraid to meet Morozka's murderous glance.

Morozka's shaggy colt tore noisily at the grass by Metchik's bunk. It seemed that the orderly was making for his horse, but actually a dark and twisted passion drew him to Metchik. But, filled with contempt and towering pride, Morozka would not confess this even to himself. As Morozka drew nearer, Metchik's feeling of guilt became deeper and deeper; his joy evaporated, and he stared at Morozka with timid, shrinking eyes, and could not turn them away. The orderly gripped the bridle of the horse; the colt pushed him with its head, turning him—deliberately, it seemed—to Metchik, and the latter was suddenly overpowered by the man's look of black, violent hatred. In that brief moment

he felt so humiliated, so thoroughly frightened, that confused words rushed suddenly to his lips, but he could not utter a sound.

"Loafing here in the rear!" Morozka spat out in a fury, giving voice to his thoughts and ignoring Metchik's mute protestations. "In a shagreen blouse, too!"

He was infuriated by the thought that Metchik might attribute his anger to jealousy; he himself could not fathom its real cause, and he cursed long and obscenely.

"What are you cursing about?" Metchik asked, flaring up and feeling, inexplicably, relieved when Morozka stopped cursing. "I've had my legs smashed up—and it wasn't in the rear, either!" he said, shuddering, with all the passion of a wounded vanity. At the moment he really believed his legs were smashed up, and on the whole he felt as if it were Morozka and not he who wore shagreen blouses. "We've heard about such front-line heroes!" he added, turning pink. "And I'd tell you—if I didn't owe you... though I regret it—"

"Ah! That's got you!" Morozka screamed, almost jumping in his excitement, resolved not to listen and refusing to understand what Metchik was saying. "You've forgotten how I pulled you out of the fire? Saving people like you just makes a lot of trouble for us!" he shouted loudly, as if he did nothing all day but pull people "out of the fire" like chestnuts. "Yes, a lot of trouble! You give me a pain in the neck!" And in his exasperation he slapped himself on the back of the neck.

Stashinsky and Kharchenko dashed out from the barrack hut. Frolov turned his head in protest and astonishment.

"What are you shouting about?" Stashinsky demanded, blinking one eye with terrific rapidity.

"Where's my good sense?" Morozka bawled in answer to Metchik's question on that score. "Here's my good sense—here, here!" he yelled furiously, gesticulating obscenely.

From the taiga, the nurse and Pika came running towards them, shouting in chorus. Morozka mounted the colt in a leap and lashed it with his whip—which was something he did only in moments of the most violent anger. Mishka reared on his hind legs and jumped aside as though scalded.

“Wait, you’ve got a letter to take! Morozka!” Stashinsky cried in confusion. But Morozka was no longer there. From the disturbed depths of the forest came the sound of madly galloping hoofs, which soon died away in the distance.





VIII. THE FIRST MOVE

The road rushed past him in an endless taut ribbon; the overhanging branches stung Morozka's face; but still he urged on his maddened horse, seething with fury, mortification, and revengefulness. Scraps of his violent talk with Metchik, one more biting than another, returned again and again to his inflamed mind, but Morozka felt, nevertheless, that he had not expressed his contempt for men of that sort strongly enough.

He could have reminded Metchik, for example, with what frenzied hands Metchik had clutched at him in that field of barley; how his eyes had been filled with an abject fear for his own mean little life. He could have jeered at him devastatingly for his love for the curly-headed miss whose pic-

ture, perhaps, he still treasured in the pocket of his jacket next to his heart, and he could have called that clean, pretty miss the vilest names.

Here he recalled that Metchik was carrying on with his wife and would no longer care enough about the clean miss to take offence; and, instead of a spiteful triumph over a humiliated rival, Morozka again felt he had suffered an irreparable insult.

Mishka, resenting his master's unfairness, kept up his pace only while the bit still cut into his sore lips; when it was loosened he slackened his pace and, feeling no further urge from his master, walked with ostentatious haste, very much like a human being who is deeply hurt but who still strives to maintain his dignity. He even paid no attention to the jays, which were screeching far too much and as unnecessarily as ever this evening, and which seemed to him more than usually fussy and stupid.

The taiga opened out into a grove of birch-trees growing along its edge; the sun, gleaming redly through the trees, struck Morozka full in the face. Everything was cozy, transparent, and gay here, with not a trace of the jay-like fussiness of men. Morozka cooled down. The insults he had heaped or had wanted to heap on Metchik had already lost their vivid avenging colours; they now appeared colourless and unpleasant; they were too loud and senseless. He was already sorry about his skirmish with Metchik, that he hadn't "stuck to his line" to the end. He felt now that he cared more about Varya than he had liked to think, and at the same time he knew with certainty that he would never go back to her. And because Varya had been closer to him than anyone else and had been a link with his old life in the pit, when he had lived "like everybody else," when everything had seemed simple and straightforward to him—because of this he felt, now that he had parted with her, as if that long and unbroken stretch of life were finished and his new life had not yet begun.

The sun looked into Morozka's eyes under the peak of his cap. It still hung above the mountain range, a cold, unblinking eye; but the fields were desolate and lifeless.

He saw ungathered sheaves still lying in the half-reaped barley fields, a woman's apron, forgotten upon a stack, a rake stuck hastily in a boundary-ditch. On a stack of barley, which toppled sideways, a crow perched silently, as lonely as an orphan. All this did not imprint itself on Morozka's mind. He had stirred the caked dust covering old memories and had discovered that they were not joyous at all but were a cheerless, accursed burden. He felt forsaken and lonely. It seemed to him that he was sailing over a huge deserted field and its terrifying emptiness only increased his loneliness.

He was brought to his senses by the sudden thud of a horse's hoofs behind a hillock. He jerked up his head and there in front of him was the erect little figure of a mounted patrol, smartly belted at the waist, riding a large-eyed, lively horse. So unexpected was the encounter that the horse reared on its hind legs.

"You devil!" the patrol cursed, catching his cap as it flew from his head. "Is that you, Morozka? Get back home as fast as you can. The things going on there! By God, can't make head or tail of them!"

"What's going on?"

"Some deserters passed by and told a whole cartful of stories, a whole carful. Said that the Japs are liable to be here any minute. The peasants ran home from the fields, the women burst into tears. They've taken all their carts to the ferry, enough of them to fill a market! What a sight, what a sight! They nearly murdered the ferryman. I'm sure he hasn't taken them all across even now; no, I'm sure he hasn't. Grishka dashed around for about ten versts, but there's not a sign of the Japs—not a sign. It's all hogwash! They lied, the bastards! They ought to be shot for things like that, but it'd be a pity to waste cartridges on them—yes, just a waste of cartridges." The patrol was spitting in his

excitement, brandishing his whip, taking his cap off and putting it on again, shaking his locks with a devil-may-care grace, as if he wanted to say, besides everything else, "Just look at me, old chap! The girls are all crazy about me!"

Morozka remembered that two months ago this fellow had stolen a tin mug from him and had sworn afterwards that it had been in his possession "since the German front." Though he did not regret the loss of the mug now, the memory of it at once brought him back (even before the patrol's words, to which indeed he paid no attention, absorbed as he was in his own thoughts) into the familiar channels of company life. The urgent relay dispatch, the return of Kanunnikov, Osokin's retreat, the rumours on which the company had subsisted of late—all this swept over him in a wave of alarm which washed away the black scum of the past day.

"Deserters? What are you talking about?" he interrupted the patrolman.

The patrol lifted a surprised eyebrow and became motionless, his cap, which he had just taken off and was about to put on again, hanging in mid air.

"All you care about is a chance to cut a fine figure, you ass!" Morozka said contemptuously. Angrily he pulled the horse's bridle, and in a few minutes he had reached the ferry.

The ferryman, a hairy fellow, one leg of whose trousers was rolled up, revealing a large boil on the knee, was indeed exhausted from steering the overloaded ferry from one bank to the other, yet many still remained on this side. As soon as the ferry landed, an avalanche of people, sacks, carts, screaming children and cradles crashed down on him. Everyone tried to be the first to clamber on to the ferry. All of them pushed one another, yelling, squeaking, falling, while the ferryman, having lost his voice, strained his throat in a vain attempt to restore order. A snub-nosed peasant woman, who had found time to get a few words with the de-

serters, could not make up her mind whether to hurry home or finish her story to those remaining on this bank, and so missed the ferry for the third time. She dumped on the ground a huge sack, larger than herself, filled with beet-root leaves for her pigs, and now mumbled "Lord, Lord!" in prayer, now began to tell her story all over again—so that she might be late for the ferry for the fourth time.

Pitched into this confusion, Morozka was tempted by force of habit ("just for the fun of it") to scare them, but for some reason decided not to. He jumped from his horse and began to reassure the crowd.

"Stop your lying chatter; there are no Japs there!" he interrupted the peasant woman, who was now in a fever of excitement. "Talking about poison gases! Gases indeed! Some Koreans burning straw, probably, and she talks about ga-a-ses!"

The peasants, forgetting about the woman, crowded round him. He suddenly felt he had become an important, responsible person, and, delighted with this unusual role and pleased that he had suppressed the temptation to "scare them," he contradicted and mocked the deserters' stories until he had finally quietened all present. When the ferry landed again, there was no longer the same scramble, and Morozka himself supervised the ferrying of the carts. The peasants regretted having left their fields so early and, annoyed with themselves, swore at their horses. Even the snub-nosed woman with the sack finally wedged herself into somebody's cart between the heads of two horses and the broad backside of a peasant.

Leaning over the railing, Morozka watched white circles of foam eddying round the ferry-boats; none of them tried to overtake the other; their fixed order reminded him that he himself had just organized the peasants, and the thought was a pleasing one.

Near the cattle-shed he met the relief patrol—five fellows from Dubov's platoon. They greeted him with laughter and good-natured obscenities, for they were always glad to see

him and there was nothing else they had to say to each other; they were all healthy and strong young fellows, and the oncoming evening was cool and invigorating.

"Go to hell!" Morozka shouted after them, following them with envious eyes. He longed to be with them, with their laughter and their curses, to ride hard with them in the cool, invigorating evening.

This encounter with the partisans reminded Morozka he had not taken Stashinsky's letter when leaving the hospital, and that meant trouble. He remembered the meeting when he was all but kicked out of the company, and his heart sank. It was only now that Morozka realized that this event had probably been the most important of all that had happened to him during the last month—far more important, indeed, than what had occurred at the hospital.

"Mishka, old chap!" he said to the horse, clutching its forelock. "I'm fed up with everything, brother—fed up with all this bloody business!"

Mishka tossed his head and snorted.

As he rode up to headquarters Morozka came to a definite decision: "to spit on everything" and to ask to be sent back to the platoon, to the other fellows, and to be relieved of his duties as orderly.

On the porch at headquarters Baklanov was questioning the deserters—they were disarmed and under guard. Sitting on one of the steps, Baklanov was taking down the men's names.

"Ivan Filimonov," one man quavered in a pitiful voice, stretching his neck as far out as he could.

"What?" Baklanov asked again in formidable tones, turning his whole body towards the man in the way Levinson would. (Baklanov was certain that Levinson did this in order to stress the exceptional importance of his questions, while in reality Levinson did so because he had been wounded in the neck long ago and could not turn his head.)

"Filimonov? What's your father's first name?"

"Where's Levinson?" Morozka asked. Somebody nodded towards the door. Tidying his hair he went into the hut.

Levinson was busy at a table in the corner and did not notice him. Morozka, irresolute, played with his whip. As everybody else in the company, he looked on the commander as an exceptional man. But since his whole experience of life had taught him that such men did not exist, he tried to convince himself that Levinson was, on the contrary, a rogue if there ever was one, and a cunning fellow. Nevertheless, he was also convinced that the commander saw through everything and that it was pretty nearly impossible to deceive him; when at times he had to ask him about something, Morozka had always felt strangely not up to the mark.

"Still nibbling at your papers like a mouse?" he said at last. "I took your letter along all right."

"Any answer?"

"No-o-o...."

"Good." Levinson put aside the map and got up.

"Look here, Levinson," Morozka began. "I've got something to ask you. If you do it, you'll be a friend of mine for ever, I swear it!"

"A friend for ever?" Levinson repeated with a smile.

"Well, go ahead; what do you want?"

"Send me back to my platoon."

"To your platoon? Why?"

"Oh, that's a long story. I'm fed up with it, I tell you. As if I'm not a partisan at all, but a ..." Morozka waved his hand and scowled, afraid to swear and ruin the whole business.

"And who's to be orderly?"

"Well, Yefimka can be got to be one," said Morozka eagerly. "He's a great horseman, I can tell you—he used to get prizes for riding in the old army!"

"A friend for ever, you say?" Levinson repeated once more in a tone that would have led one to believe that this was the most important consideration of all.

"Stop making fun of me, you devil's plague!" Morozka exploded. "I've come to talk business, and you hee-haw...."

"Now, don't get excited—it's bad for you. Tell Dubov to send Yefimka, and... you may go."

"You're a real friend... you've done me a good turn!" Morozka cried, overjoyed. "There's a commander for you! Levinson! Marvellous!..." He tore the cap from his head and flung it on the floor.

Levinson picked up the cap and said, "Idiot."

It was already dark when Morozka reached his platoon. There were about a dozen men in the hut when he came in. Dubov, sitting astride a bench, was taking a revolver apart by the light of a night lamp.

"Ah, you devil's son!" he growled from under his moustache. He noticed the bundle in Morozka's hands and asked, surprised, "What are you doing here with all your things? Have you been reduced to the ranks, or what?"

"Finished!" Morozka shouted. "I've retired! A feather in my backside, and I'm free as a bird and no pension! Pack off Yefimka—the commander's orders."

"Guess I ought to thank you for this, eh?" Yefimka said ironically. He was a dry and bilious, pimply fellow.

"Go along, go along; and don't ask questions. In a word, congratulations, Yefim Semyonovich! You owe us a drink for that."

In his delight at being once more among the fellows Morozka joked, teased, pinched the mistress of the house, and danced round the hut until he finally bumped into the platoon commander and upset his oil-can.

"You dunderhead, you rusty swivel!" Dubov roared, and thumped him on the back with such force that Morozka's head almost parted company with his body.

And though the blow hurt, Morozka did not take offence. He even enjoyed Dubov's rough language and his habit of using words and expressions which nobody could understand. All that went on here Morozka accepted as natural and appropriate.

"Well, it's time, it's high time," Dubov said. "It's a good thing you've rejoined us. You've become a rotter there, rusty as an old useless screw. You've shamed us all."

Everybody agreed that it was a good thing, but for a different reason: most of them liked Morozka for the very things Dubov disliked in him.

Morozka tried to put the memory of his visit to the hospital out of his head. He was very much afraid of being asked, "How's your wife getting on?"

Later on, he went with the other fellows to the river to water the horses. The owls hooted in the trees, their cries muffled and not at all ill-omened; the heads of the horses, bent silent and watchful over the water, were almost invisible in the mist rising above the river; the dark bushes along the bank seemed to shrink in the cold honey dew.

"This is the life!" Morozka said to himself and whistled affectionately to his horse.

Back in the hut they mended their saddles and cleaned their rifles. Dubov read aloud letters he had received from the pit. When he turned in for the night, he appointed Morozka night sentry "to celebrate his home-coming."

That whole evening Morozka felt that he was a good soldier and a good and useful man.

A violent dig in the ribs awakened Dubov during the night.

"What? What?" he asked in alarm and sat up. Scarcely had he time to open his sleepy eyes to stare at the dimly burning night lamp when he heard, or rather felt, a distant shot and then another.

Morozka stood by his bed, shouting, "Get up, quick! There's shooting across the river!"

Several shots rang out one by one, almost at regular intervals.

"Wake the fellows!" Dubov ordered. "Run like the wind to every hut! Hurry!"

A few seconds later he rushed out into the yard dressed and armed. The sky, cold and windless, was already get-

ting light. The stars raced panic-stricken along the misty untrodden paths of the Milky Way. From the dark mouth of the hayloft the dishevelled figures of the partisans tumbled out one after another. Swearing, they buckled their cartridge-belts and led out their horses. The hens flew out from the coops with a terrific cackling. The horses bucked and whinnied.

"Turn out! Mount your horses!" Dubov ordered. "Dmitri, Semyon! Wake the men in the huts! At the double!"

A rocket went up in the square in front of headquarters and hissed smokily across the sky. A sleepy peasant woman thrust her head out of the window and quickly drew it back again.

"Tie it up!" said a trembling, despondent voice.

Yefimka, dashing along from headquarters, shouted at the gate, "Turn out! Fall in at the gathering point in full battle dress!" The head of his horse, its teeth bared, reared above the top log of the gate. He shouted something else no one could understand and vanished.

When the men who had been sent to rouse the rest of the platoon returned, it appeared that more than half of the platoon had not spent the night in their quarters: they had gone to the evening gathering and had probably gone to sleep with the girls. Dubov, flustered, did not know whether to proceed with what men he had or to ride to headquarters himself and find out what was afoot. Cursing God and the Holy Synod, he sent horsemen out in all directions to collect the men one by one. Twice there galloped up mounted orderlies with orders to appear with the whole platoon, but still the missing men could not be found. Running about the yard, like a trapped beast, Dubov in his despair was on the verge of sending a bullet through his head, and would perhaps have done so had he not been aware all the time of his grave responsibility. Many of his men that night had the bad luck to meet with his merciless fists.

Finally, followed by the frenzied barking of the dogs, the platoon tore off to headquarters, filling the terrified streets

with the mad thudding of the horses' hoofs and the ring of steel.

Dubov was dumbfounded when he saw the whole of the detachment in the square. Along the high road the baggage-train stretched out; many of the men had dismounted and were sitting near their horses and smoking. His eyes sought out the slight figure of Levinson, who was standing near a pile of logs illuminated by torches and talking calmly with Metelitsa.

"Why are you so late?" Baklanov pounced upon him. "And yet you brag, 'We miners'!" He was beside himself with rage; otherwise he would never have dared to say such a thing to Dubov.

The platoon commander only bowed his head. What hurt him most of all was the feeling that this young fellow Baklanov now had the right to curse him as he liked, and that no curses were punishment enough for his guilt. Besides, Baklanov had touched him on the raw: deep in his heart Dubov believed that the name of miner was the highest and the most honourable a man on this earth could bear. Now he was convinced that his platoon had dishonoured not only itself but also the Suchan mines and all the "coal-eaters," at least until the seventh generation.

Having cursed Dubov to his heart's content, Baklanov rode off to withdraw the patrols. Dubov learned from his five men who had just returned from the other side of the river that there was no enemy there, and that they had started all that gunplay at Levinson's orders. He realized then that Levinson had wanted to test the preparedness of the company; and he felt still more furious at the thought that he had let down his commander and had failed to set an example for the others.

When the platoons lined up and the roll-call was taken, it was discovered that many of the men were still missing. The majority of the missing men were from Kubrak's pla-

toon. Kubrak himself had gone to say good-bye during the day to his relatives and had not sobered up yet. Again and again he made speeches to his platoon, asking them whether "they could respect a scoundrel and a swine like himself," weeping all the time; and the whole company saw that he was drunk. Levinson alone pretended to see nothing; otherwise he would have been forced to dismiss Kubrak from his post, and there was nobody who could take over.

Levinson rode past the lines and, returning to the centre, lifted his hand in a cold and severe gesture. The mysterious sounds of the night could be heard.

"Comrades!" Levinson began, and his voice, low but distinct, was as intimate to every man as the beating of his own heart. "We're going away from here. Where? There's no point in answering that question just now. The Japanese forces, though there is no need to exaggerate them, are large enough to make it advisable for us to lie low for a time. This doesn't mean that we shall be altogether out of danger. No. We are always in danger, and every partisan knows that. Are we true to our partisan calling? Today we did not justify it. We've got as little discipline as a bunch of schoolgirls. What if the Japanese were really to attack us? They'd cut our throats in no time. Shame!"

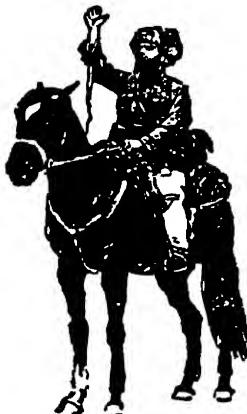
Levinson bent forward abruptly, and his last word flew from him like an uncoiled spring, so that everyone suddenly felt merciless iron fingers grip his throat.

Even Kubrak, though he had not understood a word, cried with deep conviction, "That's right... every word of it!..." He shook his square head and hiccupped loudly.

Every moment Dubov expected Levinson to say, "Here's Dubov, for example—he turned up tonight after the feast, and I was counting on him more than on anybody else. Shame!" But Levinson mentioned nobody by name. In fact, he spoke very little, but stressing one point, as though hammering in a huge nail which had to serve for all eternity. It was only after he was convinced that he had driven his

point home that he looked in Dubov's direction and said, "Dubov's platoon will go with the baggage-train . . . just to cool them down a bit—they're so quick in the uptake." He raised himself in the stirrups and, flicking his whip, shouted, "Atten-tion! From the right in threes . . . march!"

The curbs jingled, the saddles creaked loudly, and, swaying in the night, like a huge fish in a stagnant pool, the thick lines of men seemed to float towards the ancient Sikhote-Alin spurs, from behind which, at once so ancient and so youthful, the dawn was already rising.





IX. METCHIK IN THE COMPANY

Stashinsky learned about the company's departure from the assistant quartermaster, who had come to the hospital to see about supplies.

"That Levinson is a sly fellow!" said the assistant quartermaster, turning his hunched back, covered with a bleached tunic, towards the sun. "Without him we'd all be lost. Just think, nobody knows the way to the hospital, so if the Japs should chase us, the whole company will dash here and escape from them. And here we've already got stores and rations. Isn't he clever?" He wagged his head in admiration, and Stashinsky could see that he praised Levinson not only because Levinson was clever, but because it pleased the man to ascribe to somebody qualities he himself did not possess.

That same day Metchik stood on his feet again for the first time. Supported under the arms, he walked in the meadow, overjoyed and astonished at the feeling of the springy turf under his feet, and laughing without any cause. Later on, lying on his bunk, he listened to the rapid pounding of his heart, due either to fatigue or to that joyful sensation of the turf under his feet. His legs still trembled with weakness, and the whole of his body tingled with happiness.

While Metchik was walking Frolov watched him with envious eyes, and Metchik could not suppress a strange feeling of guilt in his presence. Frolov had already been ill for so long that he had exhausted the compassion of those about him. In their constant concern and their attentions he heard the question, "When *are* you going to die?" But he did not want to die. And the obvious senselessness of his clutching at life weighed on them all like a tombstone.

Until the last day of Metchik's stay in the hospital his strange relationship with Varya continued; it resembled a game in which each knew what the woman wanted and the man feared, but neither of them could decide to take a bold and decisive step.

During her difficult and patient life, in which there had been so many men that it was impossible to distinguish between them now by the colour of their eyes or their hair, or even by their names, Varya had been unable to say to anyone of them, "My sweetheart, my beloved!" Metchik was the first man to whom she could—and she did—say these words. It seemed to her that he alone, so good-looking, so modest and tender, could satisfy her yearning for motherhood, and that she had fallen in love with him for no other reason. In her mute agitation she called to him at night and searched for him by day with unpeased longing, trying to lead him away from people in order to offer him her belated love, but she could never bring herself, for some reason or other, to speak frankly to him.

And though Metchik desired what she desired with all the ardour and imagination of his scarcely matured youth, he

did everything to avoid remaining alone with her: he either dragged Pika along with him or pleaded ill health. He was timid because he had never yet known a woman; it seemed to him that he would not manage it like others did, but would somehow bungle the job disgracefully. Whenever he succeeded in overcoming his shyness, he was stopped by the memory of the enraged figure of Morozka stalking out of the taiga and flourishing his whip; and Metchik was assailed then by a mixture of panic and a sense of being unable to repay his debt to the man.

In the course of this game he grew thinner and taller, but until the last moment he was unable to overcome his weakness. He left the hospital together with Pika; they took leave of everyone awkwardly, as if they were parting from people whom they hardly knew. Varya caught them up on the footpath.

"Let's at least say good-bye properly," she said, her face glowing because she had been running and because she was embarrassed. "I was somehow shy over there. It never happened before, but this time I was shy." With a guilty air she slipped into his hand an embroidered tobacco pouch, as all the young girls at the mines used to do.

Her embarrassment and her gift were so unlike her that Metchik felt a twinge of pity. Because Pika was standing by he barely touched her cheek with his lips. She gave him a farewell look with her misty eyes, and her lips quivered.

"Come and see me!" she cried, when they had already disappeared among the trees, and hearing no reply, she dropped to the ground and wept.

On the way, shaking off his sad memories, Metchik decided that he was a true partisan; he even rolled up his sleeves in his anxiety to get sunburnt. It seemed to him that this was very important in the new life which had begun for him after that memorable conversation with the nurse.

The mouth of the Irokhedza was occupied by the Japanese troops and by Kolchak's soldiers. Pika was afraid and nervous, and complained throughout the journey of imaginary

pains. Metchik could not get him to agree to going round the village through the valley. They had therefore to climb over the mountains, along unfamiliar goat-tracks. On the second night they scrambled down rocky cliffs to the river, almost killing themselves on the way: Metchik was still not quite sure on his feet. It was almost morning when they reached a Korean farm; greedily they swallowed *chumiza* without salt. Looking at Pika's dishevelled, pitiful figure, Metchik could not for the life of him recall that enchanting image of a quiet, bright old man sitting by a peaceful reedy lake. Pika's crushed appearance somehow stressed the instability and the deceptiveness of that peace, which held neither rest nor salvation.

Then they made their way across scattered farms, where nobody had heard of the Japanese. When the farmers were asked whether the company had passed that way, they pointed up the river, asked in turn for news, and treated them to honey kvass, the girls making eyes at Metchik. A busy time had come for the women; the roads were smothered by the thick, heavy-eared wheat. In the morning the empty spiders' webs glistened with dew, and the autumn air was filled with the plaintive humming of bees.

They reached Shibishi towards evening. The little village sprawled in the light of the setting sun at the foot of a wooded mountain. Near a tiny decrepit chapel, overgrown with lichen, a group of gay, lusty-voiced fellows, with great red rosettes on their caps, were playing Russian skittles. A short man, wearing large top-boots, and with a long, red pointed beard, which made him look like a gnome from a children's fairy-tale book, had just thrown all his bats shamefully wide of the mark. They all laughed at him. The man grinned sheepishly, but it was evident to all that he was not in the least put out, and was enjoying himself no less than the others.

"That's him, that's Levinson," said Pika.

"Where?"

"There, the red-headed one."

Leaving the perplexed Metchik, Pika shuffled over to the short man with surprising rapidity.

"Look, boys! Here's Pika!"

"Yes, it's him all right!"

"So he managed to crawl after us, the bald-headed devil."

Their game forgotten, the fellows gathered round the old man. Metchik stood at a distance from them, not knowing whether to join them or to stay where he was until he was called.

"Who's that you've got with you?" Levinson asked at last.

"Oh, a fellow from the hospital, a good sort!"

"That's the wounded lad Morozka brought in," somebody added recognizing Metchik. Hearing that they were talking about him, he drew nearer.

The small man who played skittles so badly had large, alert eyes; they seemed to grip Metchik, turn him inside out, and hold him in this way for a few moments as if weighing up everything there was in him.

"I've come to join your company," Metchik began, crimsoning because he had forgotten to turn down his sleeves. "I used to be with Shaldiba until I was wounded," he added to give weight to his words.

"How long were you with Shaldiba?"

"From June, roughly... from about the middle...."

Levinson threw another sharp, searching glance at him.

"Can you shoot?"

"Yes..." Metchik said uncertainly.

"Yefimka, get a rifle."

While Yefimka ran off to fetch the rifle, Metchik was aware of dozens of pairs of curious eyes probing him. He began to think that their mute intensity was prompted by hostility.

"Well, here you are. Now, what will you shoot at?" Levinson's eyes swept the place.

"At the cross!" somebody suggested gleefully.

"No, better not. Yefimka, put this skittle on the post over there."

Metchik took the rifle and almost shut his eyes, seized by



a sudden apprehension—not because he had to shoot, but because he believed that everybody wanted him to miss.

"Hold your left hand nearer; it's easier that way," somebody advised him.

These words, uttered with unmistakable sympathy, helped Metchik a lot. Emboldened, he pressed the trigger, and as the crash came—he could not help blinking then—he managed to see the skittle falling from the post.

"You can shoot." Levinson laughed. "Have you ever ridden a horse?"

"No," Metchik confessed, prepared by his success to take upon himself the sins of the whole of mankind.

"Too bad," Levinson said. It was clear that he really did think it was too bad. "Baklanov, give him Zyuchikha." He narrowed his eyes slyly. "Take care of her; she's a harmless horse. Your platoon commander will tell you how to manage her. What platoon shall we put him in?"

"Kubrak's I'd say—he's short of men," Baklanov said. "Him and Pika."

"Why not?" Levinson agreed. "Get going!"

One glance at Zyuchikha was enough to make Metchik forget his recent triumph and the proud boyish hopes it had raised in him. The animal was a blear-eyed, melancholy mare, dirty-white in colour, hollow-backed and pot-bellied, a docile peasant's horse that had ploughed many an acre in its life. Besides, it was in foal. Its queer nickname became it as well as God's blessing becomes a lisping old hag.

"Is this for me?" Metchik asked in a small voice.

"She's not much to look at," said Kubrak, slapping the horse on the hindquarters. "Her hoofs are weak, I own, whether due to a soft life or just to poor health. But you can ride her, though." He turned his bristling, grey, square head and repeated with mulish conviction, "Yes, you can ride her."

"Don't you have other horses?" Metchik asked, at once filled with an impotent fury against Zyuchikha and against the prospect of riding her.

Kubrak, not bothering to reply, began to tell Metchik in a dull and monotonous voice what he had to do in the morning, at dinner-time, and in the evening with this decrepit mare to protect it against the innumerable illnesses and dangers which threatened it.

"When you come back from a long ride, don't unsaddle her at once," the platoon commander instructed him. "Let her stand for a while, let her cool down. As soon as you do unsaddle her, wipe her back with your hands or with hay. Before you saddle her again, you must also wipe her."

Metchik's lips twitched; he stared over the horse's head and paid no attention. He felt as if this disgraceful mare with its appalling hoofs had been given him for the sole purpose of humiliating him from the start. Of late, he analyzed every step he took from the angle of the new life which he had resolved to lead. And now it seemed to him that it was impossible to embark upon that new life with this hateful horse. Nobody would be able to see that he was already a changed man—strong and sure of himself; everybody would think that he was the same queer old Metchik, who could not be trusted even with a good horse.

"This mare, besides her other shortcomings, is mangy," the platoon commander said, quite unconvincingly, unconcerned either with Metchik's annoyance or with the amount of attention his words received. "The thing to do is to treat her with sulphate—only we haven't got any. So we treat them with the droppings of the fowls—it's quite a good cure. You have to wrap some droppings in a piece of cloth and tie it round the bit before you put the bridle on. It works wonderfully."

"What am I—a little boy?" Metchik thought, not listening to the platoon commander. "No, I'll go and tell Levinson that I refuse to ride such a horse. I'm not obliged to suffer for others." It pleased him to think that he was being sacrificed for somebody else's sake. "No, I'll give it to him straight from the shoulder. He can't do this to me!"

It was only when the platoon commander had finished and the horse had been finally handed over to his care that he regretted not having listened to the instructions. Zuy-chikha, drooping its head, twitched its white lips, and Metchik realized that the mare's life was now wholly in his hands. But he did not know what to do with that life. He did not even know how to tether this docile mare. It wandered about the stables, in the dark, poking its head into the other horses' hay and irritating them and the men on duty.

"Where the hell is that new fellow? Why doesn't he tie up his mare?" someone shouted in the shed, and a whip cracked furiously. "Get along, you bloody bitch! Hey, who's on duty? Take her away; tell her to go to—"

Metchik, sweating all over in his hurry and excitement, swearing wickedly to himself, brushing against thorny bushes, walked down the dark and sleepy streets, trying to find headquarters. At one moment he nearly stumbled into an evening gathering of young people; a hoarse accordion was bellowing out "Saratov Ditties"; cigarettes glowed in the darkness; spurs and sabres rang; the girls shrieked delightedly; the whole place shook in a mad dance. Metchik did not dare to ask the way and passed by. He might have wandered about the streets all night if a solitary figure had not dived suddenly from round a corner.

"Comrade, how can I get to headquarters?" Metchik asked, approaching him. He recognized Morozka. "Hello!" he said in great confusion.

Morozka stopped in amazement, uttering incoherent sounds.

"Second house on your right," he answered at last, not finding anything else to say. His eyes gleamed strangely, and he continued on his way, without looking back.

"Morozka! Why, of course he's here," Metchik thought, and, as in earlier days, he felt isolated, surrounded by dangers of one sort or another, in the shape of Morozka, the

dark, unfamiliar streets, the unprotesting mare which he had no idea how to manage.

When he reached headquarters, his resolution evaporated; he no longer knew why he had come, what he was going to do or say.

A score of partisans were lying round a bonfire which burned in the middle of an empty yard as big as a field. Levinson sat close by the fire, as though spell-bound by the smoking, hissing blaze, his legs crossed under him in Korean fashion. To Metchik he seemed more than ever like a gnome from children's fairy-tale. Metchik advanced and stood behind the men; nobody looked round at him. The partisans were taking turns at telling obscene stories, in all of which there appeared a slow-witted priest, his strongly-sexed wife, and a daring young fellow who well knew the ways of the world and who artfully deceived the priest and won the sweet favours of his wife. It seemed to Metchik that they told these stories not because they were really amusing, but because they had no other tales to tell, and that they laughed out of a sense of duty. Nevertheless, Levinson listened attentively all the time, laughed uproariously and with seeming sincerity. When they told him that it was his turn, he also told several fruity stories, and as he was the most literate person in the group, the stories he told were the most elaborate and the most obscene. But Levinson, by all appearances, was not in the least put out by it; he spun his yarns with sardonic calm, and the obscene words fell from him without seeming to touch him, as though they were not his words at all.

Looking at him, Metchik was tempted to tell a story of his own; as a matter of fact, he loved listening to these stories, although he believed them to be shameful and pretended that he was above them. But he was afraid that everyone would look at him in astonishment, and that would be a very awkward thing.

He went away, bearing in his heart annoyance with himself and cherishing resentment against them all, particu-

larly Levinson. "A fat lot I care," Metchik told himself, pursing his lips in an aggrieved pout. "Anyway, I'm not going to look after that mare. Let her give up the ghost! I'll see what he'll say then; I'm not afraid."

In the days that followed he actually did ignore the horse, taking it out only for riding exercises and now and then to water it. If his commander had happened to be more considerate, Metchik might have been pulled up, but Kubrak never took the least interest in what was going on in the platoon, letting things slide. Zyuchikha was covered with scabs, was always hungry and thirsty, rarely benefiting from somebody's charity, while Metchik was rewarded with general dislike as "a loafer and swanker."

Of the whole platoon there were only two men who were more or less friendly to him—Pika and Siskin. He chummed up with them not because he valued their friendship, but because he could get on with nobody else. Siskin himself turned up, trying to win his favour. Taking advantage of a moment when Metchik—after a quarrel with a squad leader over a rifle Metchik had failed to clean—was lying alone in a shed, staring vacantly at the ceiling, Siskin sauntered up to him.

"Blood's up?" he asked. "Forget it! He's just an ignorant peasant—why take notice of him?"

"It's not that..." said Metchik with a sigh.

"Oh, so you're bored. That's something I can understand."

Siskin lowered himself on to the detached front of a cart and, with an accustomed gesture, hitched up the tops of his thickly greased boots. "Well, you know, I'm bored, too. There are not many educated people here. Except Levinson, perhaps, although he also ..." Siskin shrugged his shoulders and looked significantly at his boots.

"He also—what?" Metchik asked with curiosity.

"Well, you know, he's not so very educated; he's just cunning. He makes capital for himself at our expense. You don't believe it?" Siskin smiled bitterly. "Yes, of course. You think he's very brave, a real general." He mouthed the

word "general" with a special relish. "Rot! We've invented all that ourselves, I assure you. Take for instance the concrete case of our retreat: instead of dealing the enemy a swift crushing blow, we scuttled off to this dirty hole. For the highest strategical reasons, mark you! Over there, perhaps, our comrades are dying, but we have strategical reasons!" Mechanically Siskin removed the lynch-pin from one of the wheels and stuck it back with an air of annoyance.

Metchik found it hard to believe that Levinson was really the man Siskin had described, but he found it interesting to listen to him. It was a long time since he heard correct speech, and he wished for some reason to believe that there was a grain of truth in Siskin's words.

"Is it really true?" he asked, raising himself. "And I took him for a very decent man."

"Decent!" Siskin exclaimed, shocked. His voice lost its customary sweet tones and now assumed a note of superiority. "How mistaken you are! Just look at the people he gets round him! What's Baklanov? A milksop. He thinks a lot of himself, but what sort of a lieutenant is he? As if the commander couldn't find anybody else! Of course, I'm a sick, wounded man myself—I've had seven bullet wounds and I've been shell-shocked, and I've no wish to be put on such a troublesome job—but in any case I can say without boasting that I wouldn't be worse than him."

"Perhaps the commander didn't know you understand the art of war?"

"Lord, he didn't know! But everybody knows it—just ask anybody you like! Naturally, some of them are jealous and will lie to you about me, but it's a fact nonetheless!"

Gradually Metchik grew animated and began to confide his moods to Siskin. They spent the whole day together. And though, after a few such talks, Siskin became thoroughly objectionable to Metchik, he could not do without him. He even sought his company when he had not seen him for

some time. Siskin passed on to him his knowledge of how to dodge guard duties and the kitchen—all that had long ago lost its novelty, and had become an irksome duty.

From that time the bustling life of the company passed Metchik by. No longer could he see the mainsprings of the company's mechanism, and feel the necessity of everything that happened in it. All his dreams of a new and daring life were drowned in this alienation, although he learned to talk back and not to fear people, grew sunburnt and ceased to trouble himself about his clothes, thus becoming on the surface indistinguishable from the others.





X. THE BEGINNING OF THE ROUT

Having met Metchik, Morozka felt to his surprise neither his former rancour nor hatred. What was left was merely bewilderment—why had this bad egg turned up again in his path? That and the subconscious conviction that he, Morozka, was in duty bound to be angry with him. Still, the encounter had excited him to such an extent that he was eager to talk to somebody about it.

"I was just going along a street," he said to Dubov, "and that fellow of Shaldiba's came straight at me from round the corner. Remember—the one I brought in that time?"

"Well?"

"Well nothing. 'Where's headquarters?' he asks. 'There,' I says, 'the second house on your right.'"

"So what?" Dubov prompted him, finding nothing worthy of attention in the tale so far and concluding that there was more to come.

"Well, I met him—that's all. What else?" Morozka asked, unreasonably irritated.

He suddenly felt bored, and lost all desire to talk to people. Instead of going to the evening dance, as he had intended, he went and lay down in a hayloft, but could not fall asleep. Distasteful memories weighed on him like a heavy load; it seemed to him that Metchik had deliberately crossed his path to make him swerve from some correct line of conduct. During the whole of the following day he wandered about, finding no peace, repressing the desire to go and see Metchik again.

"Why are we sitting here doing nothing?" he grumbled irritably to the platoon commander. "We'll rot here of boredom. What's our Levinson thinking about?"

"Why, he's thinking how best to amuse Morozka. He's worn his pants out sitting and thinking about it."

Dubov had no suspicion of the complicated emotions which stirred in Morozka. And Morozka, meeting with no sympathy, was sick at heart and felt that he would take to drink if he didn't see plenty of action soon. For the first time in his life he was consciously fighting his own impulses, but his will-power was not up to it. Only a chance event prevented him from going to pieces.

Having withdrawn to an out-of-the-way spot, Levinson very nearly lost touch with the other detachments. Scraps of news which he occasionally managed to glean suggested a ghastly picture of disintegration. The wind from the Ula-khe carried the smell of smoke and blood.

By way of hidden taiga paths, untrodden for many years by human feet, Levinson managed to get in touch with the railway line. He learned that a troop train carrying arms and uniforms was shortly expected to pass; the railwaymen promised to let him know the exact day and hour. Knowing that the whereabouts of the detachment would be sooner

or later discovered, and that it was impossible to winter in the taiga without ammunition and warm clothing, Levinson decided on the first sally. Goncharenko hastily charged his mines. On a misty night, slipping unobserved through enemy country, Dubov's platoon suddenly appeared on the railway line.

Goncharenko's mine uncoupled the goods waggons from the rest of the mail train, without harming the passenger carriages. In the crash of the explosion, in the smoke of dynamite, the blasted rails flew overhead and, shuddering through the air, rolled down the embankment. The cord which had been attached to the mine got entangled in the telegraph wires, causing many people later on to rack their brains over how and why it had been hung there.

While mounted patrols dashed about the neighbourhood, Dubov, his horses heavily loaded, waited in the Sviyagino forest and then made his way at night through the mountain gorges. In a few days he reached Shibishi, without having lost a single man.

"Well, Baklanov, hold tight now!" said Levinson, and one could not tell by his curtained eyes whether he was joking or spoke in all seriousness. That same day he divided up all the stores, issuing the army greatcoats, cartridges, sabres, and rucks to the men, leaving only as much as the pack horses could carry.

The whole Ulakhe valley, to the banks of the Ussuri, was now in enemy hands. New forces were concentrating at the mouth of the Irokhedza; Japanese scouts were prowling everywhere, more than once encountering Levinson's patrols. At the end of August the Japanese began to move up the river. They advanced slowly, and with long pauses, feeling their way at every step and sending out heavy outguards on their flanks. In the iron determination of their advance, despite its slowness, one could feel a power which was confident, intelligent, and yet blind.

Levinson's scouts returned with wild eyes, their reports contradicting one another.

"What are you saying?" Levinson demanded coldly. "Yesterday you said they were at Solomennaya, and this morning at Monakino. Does that mean they're advancing backwards?"

"I d-don't know," the scout stammered. "Maybe it was the vanguard at Solomennaya...."

"But how do you know it's the main body at Monakino and not the vanguard?"

"The peasants said so."

"You and your peasants! What were your orders?"

The scout would then invent a story to explain why it had been impossible to get any closer to the enemy. What had actually happened was that he had been so terrified by women's chatter that he had not dared to venture farther than within ten versts of the enemy, and had sat in the bushes, smoking and waiting for a convenient moment to return to the detachment.

"I'd like to see *you* poke your nose there!" he now thought, looking at Levinson with cunning, blinking peasant's eyes.

"You'll have to go there yourself," Levinson said to Baklanov. "Otherwise we'll be caught like flies here. You can't do anything with these people. Take someone with you and go before dawn."

"Who shall I take?" Baklanov asked. He tried to look grave and anxious, though everything inside him vibrated with excitement and the joy of battle; like Levinson, he considered it necessary to hide his true feelings.

"Take anybody you like. Why, take that new fellow in Kubnak's platoon... what's his name—Metchik? You'll have a chance to see what sort of a fellow he is. You see, they speak rather badly of him; perhaps they're wrong."

This scouting mission was very welcome to Metchik. In the short time he had been in the company he had amassed so large a number of unfinished tasks, unfulfilled promises and hopes that the fulfilment of one of them, taken singly, would now have neither value nor meaning. Taken together, however, they weighed heavily upon him, oppressive and

painful, making it impossible for him to escape from their senselessly narrow circle. It seemed to him that he could now break out of it with one bold stroke.

They left before dawn. The top of the taiga on the ranges was barely tinged with pink; the second cock-crow came from the village at the foot of the mountain. It was cold, dark, and a little frightening. The unusual surroundings, a presentiment of danger, the hope of success awakened in both of them that fighting spirit which ousts every other feeling. Their blood tingled warmly; their muscles tensed; the air seemed icy, burning, charged and crackling with electricity.

"God, your mare's a sight!" said Baklanov. "Don't you look after her? I suppose Kubrak, that fool, didn't show you how to manage her?" Baklanov could never have believed that a man who knew horses could let the mare get into such a state. "He didn't show you, eh?"

"Well, you see..." Metchik said in confusion. "He's not very helpful. One doesn't know whom to ask for advice."

Ashamed of his lie, he wriggled in his saddle and did not look at Baklanov.

"Why, ask anybody. We've a lot of fellows who know horses. Fine soldiers, too."

In spite of Siskin's opinion, which had embedded itself in Metchik's mind, he began to like Baklanov. He was so round and solid, and he sat in the saddle as though he were sewn to it. His eyes were brown and alert; his mind grasped everything at once, immediately distinguishing between what was significant and what was trivial, and drawing practical conclusions.

"Damn it, man! And I couldn't understand why your saddle is slipping about like that! Why, you've drawn the back saddle-strap as tight as it will go, and the front one is hanging loose. It ought to be the other way round. Let's put it right."

Before Metchik had had time to realize what was wrong, Baklanov dismounted and busied himself with the saddle-straps.

"Well, well! The sweat-cloth's all bunched up, too. Come, get down—you'll ruin the horse. We'll saddle her all over again."

After they had gone a few versts Metchik was finally convinced that Baklanov was far better and cleverer than himself, that he was, moreover, a very strong and brave man, and that he, Metchik, ought always to obey him unquestioningly. On the other hand, Baklanov's approach towards Metchik was free of bias, though he soon realized his own superiority; he spoke to him as to an equal, trying by impartial observation to discover his real worth.

"Who sent you to us?"

"I came here myself; the Maximalists told me where I should find you."

Remembering Stashinsky's incomprehensible reaction, Metchik tried to make light of the organization which had sent him.

"The Maximalists? You do wrong to mix with them—they're nothing but windbags."

"I don't care much for them. It's just because I've got a few friends from high school among them, and so I—"

"You finished high school, eh?"

"What? Yes, I did."

"That's fine! I also went to a trade school, to learn the turner's business. I didn't get a chance to finish it. I began very late, you see," he explained as if in apology. "Before that I used to work at a ship works until my younger brother got bigger, and then all this muddle began...."

A few moments later he said, slowly and thoughtfully, "Yes, high school.... I also wanted to go to high school when I was a kid, but you know how it is."

Metchik's chance remark had evidently awakened a host of unwanted memories in Baklanov. With sudden passion Metchik began to argue that it was not in the least a bad thing, but quite good, that Baklanov had not been to high school. Without himself understanding his motives, he began to persuade Baklanov that, in spite of not having been

educated, he was a fine, intelligent young man. Baklanov, however, saw no great asset in his lack of learning, and failed altogether to grasp Metchik's more complicated arguments. Somehow they failed to have a heart-to-heart talk. Both of them spurred on their horses and rode a long time in silence.

On the way they often met their scouts, who lied as brazenly as before. Baklanov only shook his head. At a farm three versts from the little village of Solomennaya they left their horses and went on foot. The sun had already dipped towards the West; the drowsy fields were enlivened by the many-coloured kerchiefs of the peasant women; peaceful shadows spread out, thick and soft, from the stocky sheaves. Meeting a cart on the road, Baklanov asked whether there were any Japs at Solomennaya.

"They say that in the morning some five Japs came along, but we've heard nothing about them the whole day. If only they'd give us a chance to get in the grain... the devil take them!"

Metchik's heart beat fast, but he was not afraid.

"That means they really are at Monakino," said Baklanov. "Those five Japs were their scouts. Now we can go into the village."

In the village they were met by the lazy barking of the dogs. They walked past a cart drawn by the gate of an inn, which they found thanks to its sign—a bundle of hay tied to a pole. There they drank some milk in Baklanov's fashion: from a bowl with bits of bread. Later on, recalling with horror the events of that day, Metchik always saw the image of Baklanov as he came out from the inn, his face beaming and happy and traces of milk gleaming white on his upper lip. They had hardly made a few steps when a fat woman ran out, holding up her skirts, from a lane and stopped short in front of them, as though transfixed. Her eyes started up under her kerchief, and she gulped the air with her mouth wide open, like a caught fish. Suddenly she cried out in a thin, piercing voice:

"Oh, my sons, where are you going? There's a huge host of Japs near the school! They're coming here! Run away at once—they're coming here!"

Before Metchik had time to grasp the meaning of her words, there appeared from the same lane, marching in step, four Japanese soldiers, their rifles slung over their shoulders. With a shout, Baklanov drew out his revolver and fired point-blank at two of them. Metchik saw bloody tatters fly out from their backs and they fell to the ground. The third cartridge jammed, putting Baklanov's revolver out of action. One of the two remaining Japanese took to flight; the other tore the rifle from his shoulder, but at that same moment Metchik, filled with a new strength that dominated him more than fear, fired several times in succession at him. The last bullets struck the Japanese when he was floundering convulsively in the dust.

"Run!" Baklanov shouted. "To the cart!"

In a few minutes, untying the horse which was prancing near the inn yard, they were flying along the street, raising hot clouds of dust. Baklanov stood on the cart, lashing the horse with the ends of the reins with all his might, constantly looking over his shoulder to see whether they were being pursued. Somewhere in the middle of the village at least five buglers sounded the alarm.

"They're here . . . all of them!" Baklanov yelled in a sort of triumphant rage. "All of them . . . the main body.... Do you hear their bugles?"

Metchik heard nothing. Lying in the bottom of the cart, he felt a wild joy; he was safe, he had killed that Japanese; he thought of him floundering convulsively there in the hot dust, writhing in the last agony of death. When he looked at Baklanov, the other's distorted face seemed to him repulsive and terrible.

The next minute Baklanov was already laughing.

"We pulled it off rather well, eh? They entered the village, and we got there, too. You're a brick, brother!"

I didn't expect it from you, I own. If it hadn't been for you, he'd have riddled us with bullets!"

Metchik, trying not to look at him, lay with lowered head, his face yellow and pale and darkly spotted, like an unreaped, rotting ear of wheat.

Having gone about two versts without hearing any sound of pursuit, Baklanov stopped the horse near a lonely elm-tree overhanging the road.

"You stay here. I'll get up the tree and see what's going on."

"What for?" Metchik asked, stammering in his agitation. "Let's hurry. We've got to report . . . it's plain that their main body is here." He tried to believe his own words, and could not. He was afraid now to remain near the enemy.

"No, we'd do better to wait. Killing those three fools is not enough. We've got to sniff out what's going on here."

Half an hour later a score of horsemen rode out from Solomenmaya. "What if they spot us?" Baklanov thought, shivering inwardly. "We shan't be able to get away from them in this cart." Controlling himself, he decided to wait until the last possible moment. The group of horsemen, who were on the other side of the hillock, were invisible to Metchik. They were already half-way towards them when Baklanov, from his point of vantage, caught sight of the infantry; they were just leaving the village in dense columns, their rifles gleaming through the dust.

In their dash back to the farm they nearly killed the horse; at the farm they mounted their own horses and in a few minutes were already racing along the road towards Shibishi. With his usual foresight Levinson had not waited for them (they returned only at night) and had strengthened the pickets—Kubrak's platoon had been dismounted for the purpose. Only a third of the platoon remained with the horses; the rest were on guard duty near the village, behind the ramparts of a small ancient Mongolian fortress. Metchik handed over his mare to Baklanov and remained with his platoon.

He was very tired but he did not want to sleep. A cold mist was creeping up from the river; Pika turned from side to side and groaned in his sleep; under the sentries' feet the grass rustled mysteriously. Metchik lay on his back, gazing at the stars: they were almost invisible in the dark void which hung behind the curtain of mist; and in his heart Metchik felt the same void, darker and emptier because no star shone in it. It occurred to him that Frolov must always feel this emptiness, and he was terrified by the sudden thought that his fate might perhaps resemble Frolov's. He tried to drive this terrible thought away, but the image of Frolov stood before his eyes. He saw him lying on his bunk, his arms hanging lifelessly and his face withered, the maple-trees rustling softly over his head. "He's dead!" Metchik thought in terror. But Frolov wagged a finger and, turning to him, said with a bony smile, "The fellows are up to no good." Suddenly convulsions began to shake him, tatters flew from him, and Metchik saw that it was not Frolov at all, but the Japanese. "It's horrible!" he thought, his whole body shuddering, but Varya leaned over him and said, "Don't be afraid!" She was cool and soft to the touch. Metchik felt better now. "Don't be cross with me because I didn't say good-bye to you in a nice way," he said gently. "I love you." She pressed close to him, and at once everything vanished, plunged somewhere, and the next moment he was already seated on the ground, blinking and groping for his rifle, and it was quite light already. Men were bustling about him, rolling up their greatcoats. Kubrak, half-hidden in a clump of bushes, was looking through his field-glasses, and they all crowded around, asking, "Where? Where?"

Metchik found his rifle at last. He scrambled up to the top of the rampart, realized that the question referred to the enemy, but seeing no sign of them, he also asked, "Where?"

"Why are you bunching up?" the platoon commander hissed, and he pushed somebody away. "Make a skirmish line!"

While they were crawling into position along the wall, Metchik stretched his neck, trying to get a glimpse of the enemy.

"But where are they?" he asked a neighbour several times. The man, lying on his stomach, his lower lip drooping, did not listen to him, but for some reason fingered his ear all the time. Suddenly he turned and swore furiously. Metchik had no time to answer in kind: there was the command, "Plat-oon!"

He thrust the muzzle of his rifle over the rampart and, still unable to see anything and annoyed that everybody else could see the enemy, fired blindly at the word "Fire!" He had no way of knowing that a good half of the platoon did not see the enemy either but pretended to, so as to avoid being ridiculed later on.

"Fire!" Kubrak repeated, and again Metchik fired.

"Aha, they've had enough!" some of the men shouted. They all began to talk noisily and incoherently, their faces joyful and excited.

"Enough, enough!" the platoon commander shouted. "Who's firing there? Spare the cartridges!"

Metchik soon learned that a Japanese reconnaissance patrol had tried to ride up. Many of those who, like himself, had seen nothing of the enemy, now jeered at him, and more than one of them boasted that the Japanese they had aimed at had flown out of their saddles. At this moment the booming report of a field-gun was heard, filling the valley with answering echoes. Several of the men dropped to the ground in terror. Metchik also shrank into himself as if he had been struck; it was the first time in his life he had heard gun-fire. The shell exploded somewhere behind the village. Then machine-guns barked madly and breathlessly, dozens of rifles fired round after round. The partisans made no answer.

Perhaps a minute later, perhaps an hour later—all sense of time disappeared, and Metchik was painfully aware of it—he felt that the number of partisans had increased; he saw Baklanov and Metelitsa coming along the wall. Baklanov held field-glasses; Metelitsa's cheek was twitching, and his nostrils were widely dilated.



"Ah, that's you lying there," said Baklanov, the furrows on his forehead smoothing out. "Well, how's it?"

Metchik smiled a tortured smile and, making a tremendous effort to collect himself, asked, "Where are our horses?"

"In the taiga. We'll be there soon, too, only we've got to hold them back for a bit. We're not so badly off here," he added, evidently wishing to reassure him. "But Dubov's platoon is down in the valley. Ah, the devil!" he swore, startled by another, nearer explosion. "Levinson's there, too." He ran along the line of men, clutching his glasses with both hands.

The next time he had to shoot, Metchik could see the Japanese soldiers: they advanced in waves, running from bush to bush, and they were so near that it seemed to Metchik there was no chance of escaping from them should that prove necessary. What he felt was not fear but a tortured expectation: when would it all end? In one of these moments Kubrak suddenly appeared and shouted, "What the hell are you firing at?"

Metchik looked back and saw that the platoon commander's words were addressed not to him, but to Pika, whom he had not even noticed until then. Pika lay lower than the others, his face buried in the earth. He was holding his rifle above his head and senselessly pulling the trigger, firing into a tree in front of him. He went on pulling the trigger even after Kubrak's yell, though now the magazine was empty and the trigger clicked in vain. The platoon commander kicked him several times with his boot, and still Pika did not raise his head.

Afterwards they all ran, at first racing in wild disorder, then straggling in single file. Metchik ran with the others, not understanding what was happening, but feeling, even in the most confused and desperate moments, that all this was not as casual and senseless as it seemed, and that quite a number of people, whose reactions at the time perhaps differed from his, were directing his own actions and those of the people about him. He did not see these men, but he

was conscious of their will, and when they reached the village and he collected his wits—they were now going at a walk, in a long file—he involuntarily searched with his eyes for those who were guiding his destiny. Levinson marched in front; he looked so small and swung his huge Mauser in so ridiculous a manner that it was hard to believe that he was the chief guiding force. While Metchik was trying to solve this problem, bullets again began to rain down upon them, thick and furious; he could almost feel them brush his hair and even the down on his ears. The file rushed ahead; a few men fell. Metchik felt that should they have to fire again, he would do so in no way different from Pika.

Another vague impression of that day was the figure of Morozka on his horse, its teeth bared, its fiery mane streaming in the wind, as he streaked past with such speed that it was impossible to distinguish where Morozka ended and the horse began. Later on he learned that Morozka was one of the mounted men detailed to establish contact between the fighting platoons.

Metchik came fully to himself only in the taiga, on a mountain path, ploughed by the hoofs of the horses. It was shadowy and quiet here, and a sombre cedar forest sheltered them under its peaceful, moss-grown branches.





XI. THE DAILY GRIND

The company hid after the battle in a deserted ravine overgrown with horse-tail and ferns. While examining the horses, Levinson's glance fell upon Zyuchikha.

"What's this?"

"What's what?" Metchik mumbled.

"Unsaddle her and show me her back."

Metchik loosened the saddle-straps with trembling fingers.

"Ah, of course, her back's sore," Levinson said in a voice which implied that he had not expected anything else. "Do you think you can ride this horse and somebody else will take care of her?"

Levinson tried hard not to raise his voice, but he was played out, his beard trembled, and his fingers nervously crumpled a twig he had torn from a tree.

"Platoon commander! Come here! Where were your eyes?"

The platoon commander stared unblinkingly at the saddle, which Metchik for some reason held in his hands. In a slow, gloomy voice he said:

"The times he's been told about it, the fool!"

"I knew it!" Levinson flung the twig away. The glance he threw at Metchik was cold and stern. "You'll go to the quartermaster and ride with the pack-horses until you've got her healed."

"Listen, Comrade Levinson," Metchik mumbled, his voice trembling with the humiliation he felt not because he had treated the horse badly, but because he thought he looked rather foolish with the heavy saddle in his hands. "I'm not to blame. Listen, wait.... You can rely on me now. I'll take good care of it."

But Levinson, not looking back, went on to the next horse.

Soon the shortage of provisions drove the company out into a neighbouring valley. For a few days the company dashed about in the maze woven by the tributaries of the Ulakhe, exhausted by numerous skirmishes with the enemy and by wearisome marches. The number of unoccupied farms was rapidly diminishing; each crumb of bread or handful of oats could be got only after hard fighting; time after time, scarcely healed wounds opened afresh. The men became grim and taciturn, drier and fiercer than ever.

Levinson firmly believed that his men were moved not only by the instinct of self-preservation, but by a higher motive, not less powerful, though hidden from superficial observation and even from most of the men themselves—a motive that induced them to suffer, even to die, to voluntarily choose to perish in the Ulakhe taiga in the name of the ultimate common goal. But he also knew that this profound instinct in his men lay buried deep under the trivial necessities of daily life, all the cares and anxieties for one's own small but vital being, because every man had to eat and sleep, and because the flesh in man is weak. Burdened with

a host of daily cares, conscious of their own weakness, they entrusted their chief burden to those who were stronger than themselves—to men like Levinson, Baklanov, Dubov—changing them with the responsibility of giving to it more attention than to their own need of eating and sleeping, and of reminding others of what was most important.

Levinson was always with his men now: he led them into battle himself, took his meals from the same pot, did not sleep nights inspecting the sentries; he was practically the only man in the detachment who had not forgotten how to laugh. Even when he talked to the men about the most commonplace matters in every word he spoke one could hear, "Look, I am suffering with you; tomorrow I, too may be killed, or perhaps I'll croak off from hunger, but I never lose heart, because croaking off is not such an important business after all...."

In spite of all this, every day unseen ties—the ties which linked him to the heart of the company.—snapped one by one. And as these ties became fewer and weaker it grew more and more difficult for him to persuade the men to obey him. He was becoming an aloof force, standing above the company.

The men used to catch fish for their dinner by stunning them with hand-grenades. Nobody was anxious to wade into the cold water, so they drove the weakest fellows in. Their choice, more often than not, fell upon Lavrushka, a former swineherd whom nobody knew by his second name, a shy, stammering fellow. He was desperately frightened of the water; he would shiver and cross himself when he crawled down the bank, and it pained Metchik to see his pitifully thin back.

One day Levinson saw what was going on.

"Wait!" he called out to Lavrushka. "Why don't you climb in yourself?" he asked a lop-sided fellow, who looked as if one side of him had been caught in a door, and who was trying to kick Lavrushka into the water.

The man raised his white eyelashes over his angry eyes and answered unexpectedly, "Why don't *you* try it?"

"I shan't try it," said Levinson quietly. "I have many other things to do. But you—you'll have to go. Off with your pants now. Don't you see the fish are already being carried away?"

"Let them go. I'm not everybody's slave!" The fellow turned his back on Levinson and slowly stalked away from the bank. Dozens of eyes followed him with approval and glanced back mockingly at Levinson.

"What loafers these fellows are!" Goncharenko began to say, unbuttoning his shirt. He stopped abruptly, starting at the sound of the commander's unusually loud shout, "Come back!"

There were notes of unexpected power in Levinson's voice.

The fellow stopped, and already regretting that he had stirred up trouble, but unwilling to disgrace himself in the eyes of his mates, said again, "I told you I wasn't going."

Levinson strode heavily towards him, his hand on his Mauser, his eyes remarkably narrow and piercing now, boring into the man. The fellow hesitated, then began to unbutton his pants.

"Quick!" Levinson said threateningly.

The man looked furtively at him, and was suddenly afraid; in his haste he got caught in one trouser-leg; and fearing that Levinson would fail to realize that it was an accident and would press the trigger, he began to pattle, "Yes, yes.... I've got tangled up... damn it!... Just a minute!..."

When Levinson looked round at the faces of his men, he saw them all staring at him with fear and respect, but that was all—there was no sympathy in their eyes. At that moment he felt that he was a hostile power raised above the company. But he was ready for it; he was convinced that the power in him was a just power.

From that day he no longer hesitated when it was a question of getting food or a day's rest. He commandeered

the cattle and ransacked the peasants' fields and gardens. But even Morozka saw that this was altogether different from his own theft of the musk melons from Ryabet's fields.

After a march of many versts over the Udege mountain spur, during which the company fed on nothing but grapes and mushrooms steamed over a bonfire, Levinson came out into the Tiger valley to a lonely Korean farm about twenty versts from the mouth of the Irokhedza. They were met there by a huge man, as fury as the taiga boots he wore, with a rusty Smith and Wesson stuck in his belt. Levinson recognized Stirksha, a bootlegger from Daubikhe.

"Ah, Levinson!" Stirksha greeted him, his voice hoarse from a chronic cold. His eyes peered out from a wild growth of hair with their usual bitter grin. "Hello! Still alive? That's good. They're looking for you here."

"Who's looking?"

"Why, the Japs, the Kolchaks.... Who else?"

"I'm hoping they won't find me. Is there any grub for us here?"

"Maybe they will find you," Stirksha said meaningfully. "They're not fools either. They've set a price on your head. They read out an order at village meetings, offering a reward for capturing you dead or alive."

"Is that so? Do they offer a lot?"

"Five hundred Siberian rubles."

"Dirt-cheap!" said Levinson with a grin. "How about getting some grub here?"

"There's nothing here. The Koreans themselves eat only *chumiza*. They've got a pig here that weighs about ten poods, but they pray over it—it's their meat for the whole winter."

Levinson went to look for the farmer. The trembling grey-haired Korean, wearing a dented wire hat, at once began imploring them not to touch his pig. Levinson, conscious of a

hundred and fifty hungry mouths behind him and pitying the Korean, tried to prove to him that he had no choice except to take the pig. The man, not understanding a single word, continued to plead, clasping his hands in prayer and repeating, "Don't eatee-eatee it.... Don't...."

"It's all the same... shoot the pig!" Levinson said, and his face wrinkled up as if it were himself, not the pig, that was going to be shot.

The Korean's face also wrinkled up, and he began to weep. Suddenly he fell on his knees and, poking his beard into the grass, started to kiss Levinson's feet. Levinson made no attempt to raise him: he was afraid that he would be unable to contain himself and would probably countermand his order.

Metchik saw it all, and his heart contracted. He ran behind the hut and buried his face in the straw, but even there he could see the tearful old face, the little figure in white huddled at Levinson's feet. "Can't this thing be avoided?" Metchik wondered feverishly; and there passed before him a long line of unprotesting, helpless peasants whose last food had also been taken from them. "No, no, it's cruel, it's much too cruel," he thought again and again, and buried himself deeper in the straw.

Metchik knew that he himself could never have treated the old Korean in that way, but he ate the pork together with all the rest of the men because he was famished.

In the early morning the enemy cut off Levinson from the mountains. After a fight lasting two hours, in which Levinson lost almost thirty men, he broke through into the Irokhedza valley. The Kolchak cavalry were close on his heels; he was forced to leave behind all his pack-horses, and it was already noon when he came out on the familiar path leading to the hospital.

Here he suddenly felt what it cost him to sit in the saddle. After the incredible strain of the recent hours his heart beat slowly and sluggishly, as though it might stop at any moment. He longed for sleep; he lowered his head, and at

once seemed to float away in the saddle, and everything became simple and unimportant. Suddenly he started from an inward jolt, as it were, and looked back. Nobody had seen him sleeping. Every man saw in front of him the commander's familiar back, bent forward slightly. How could anyone of them think that he was tired like the rest and wanted to sleep? "But shall I have enough strength to see it through?" Levinson questioned himself. He shook his head and felt his knees tremble; it was a very unpleasant feeling.

"Well, you'll see your wife soon," Dubov said to Morozka when they drew near to the hospital.

Morozka said nothing. He thought that his married life was over, though all these days he had longed to see Varya. Deceiving himself, he took this longing to be the natural curiosity of a detached onlooker: "How will things turn out with those two?"

But when he saw her—Varya, Stashinsky, and Kharchenko were standing by the hut, laughing and shaking hands with everybody—everything turned upside down in him. He rode by without stopping towards the maple-trees and busied himself for a long time with his horse, loosening the saddle-straps.

Looking for Metchik, Varya casually replied to the men's greetings, smiling at everybody in a shy, absent-minded way. Metchik met her eyes and nodded, blushing and lowering his head; he was afraid that she would run straight up to him, and then everybody would know about them. However, she discreetly refrained from showing her joy at seeing him.

Hurriedly he tied up Zyuchikha and slunk off into the forest. He had taken but a few steps when he stumbled upon Pika, who was lying near his horse. His eyes, withdrawn and vacant, were moist.

"Sit down," he said in a tired voice.

Metchik dropped down by his side.

"Where'll we go now?"

Metchik did not answer.

"I'd be fishing now... if I had my way," Pika said dreamily. "By the bee-garden. The fishes are going downstream now. I'd make a waterfall and there'd be nothing to do except pick the fish up." He was silent for a while, then added sadly, "But there's no bee-garden now! It'd be fine if there still was. It's quiet cut there, and the bees are quiet now."

Suddenly he raised himself on his elbow and, touching Metchik with his hand, spoke to him in a voice which trembled with grief and pain:

"Listen, Pavel! Listen, Pavel, my dear little boy! Can't there be another place like it, eh? How shall we live without it, Pavel, my dear boy? I've got nobody of my own, I'm all alone... an old man.... It'll soon be time for me to die...." Words failing him, he gulped and convulsively clutched the grass with his free hand.

Metchik did not look at him; he did not even listen, but at every word of the old man something quivered softly in him, as if timid fingers were plucking already withered leaves from the living stem that was his soul. "All that has come to an end," thought Metchik, "never to return...." And he mourned for his faded leaves.

"I'll go and sleep," he said to Pika, anxious to leave him now. "I'm tired...."

He went deeper into the thicket, lay down in the bushes, and fell into a restless doze. He woke suddenly, as if he had been shaken. His heart beat spasmodically, his sweaty blouse stuck to his body. Behind a bush two people were talking; he recognized the voices of Stashinsky and Levinson. He carefully parted the branches and peered out.

"All the same," Levinson was saying gloomily, "we can't hold out much longer in this area. The only way out is to the north—to the Tudo-Vaku valley." He unfastened his field-case and took out a map. "Here. We can pass across the ranges and come down along the Khaunikhedza. It's a long journey, but it can't be helped."

Stashinsky looked not at the map, but somewhere into the depths of the taiga, as if measuring each verst which would be soaked with human sweat. Suddenly he blinked his eye rapidly and looked at Levinson.

"And—Frolov? You're forgetting again."

"Yes, Frolov." Levinson dropped heavily to the grass. Metchik saw his pale profile straight in front of him.

"Of course, I can stay with him," Stashinsky said in a muffled voice after a short pause. "After all, it's my duty."

"Rubbish!" said Levinson, shaking his head. "The Japanese will be here not later than dinner-time tomorrow. Hot on our trail. Is it your duty to be killed?"

"What else can we do?"

"I don't know."

Never before had Metchik seen such an expression of helplessness on Levinson's face.

"There seems only one thing left. I've already thought about it...." Levinson stopped short, clenching his teeth, and was silent.

"Yes?" Stashinsky asked expectantly.

Metchik, sensing that something evil was afoot, leaned forward, almost betraying his presence.

Levinson wanted to express in one word the only thing left, but apparently this word was such a hard one that he could not bring himself to say it. Stashinsky glanced at him with fearful, shocked eyes and . . . understood.

Without looking at each other, shuddering and stammering in their horror, they talked further about the thing they both understood now, but which neither of them could describe in the one word which would at once express everything and end their torments.

"They want to kill him!" Metchik cried out inwardly. He turned pale, his heart beat so violently that he feared it would be heard by the men on the other side of the bush.

"How is he? Bad? Very bad?" Levinson asked several times. "If it wasn't for that... Well, if it weren't us, anyway.... In short—is there any hope of his getting better?"

"No hope at all. But is that the chief thing?"

"Still, it makes it easier," Levinson confessed. He felt ashamed at the same instant at this attempt to deceive himself, but he really felt it would be easier that way. After a brief silence he said softly, "We'll have to do it today. Only take care that nobody suspects. Above all, he himself mustn't know. Can that be done?"

"He won't know. It'll soon be time to give him bromide, so instead of bromide.... But perhaps we could put it off until tomorrow?"

"What for? What's the difference?" Levinson replaced the map and got up. "It's got to be done, there's no help for it. That so?" Involuntarily he sought support from a man who himself needed it.

"Yes, that's so," Stashinsky thought, but he said nothing.

"Listen," Levinson began slowly, "let's get this straight—are you prepared to do it? If not, say so."

"Am I prepared?" Stashinsky repeated. "Yes, I'm prepared."

"Come on." Levinson touched his sleeve, and both went slowly back to the barrack hut.

"Are they really going to do it?" Metchik fell face downward into the grass, his hands pressed to his eyes. He lay thus he did not know for how long. Then he got up and, clinging to the bushes, reeling like a wounded man, dragged himself after Stashinsky and Levinson.

The horses, unsaddled and cool now, turned their tired heads towards him; some of the partisans were snoring in the glade, others were cooking dinner. Metchik looked around for Stashinsky and, not finding him there, started at a run towards the hut.

He burst in just in time. Stashinsky, standing with his

back to Frolov, his trembling hands raised to the light, was pouring something into a glass.

"Wait! What are you doing?" Metchik shouted, rushing towards him, his eyes wide with terror. "Wait! I heard everything!"

Stashinsky started and jerked his head about; his hands trembled still more violently. Suddenly he took a step towards Metchik; a purple vein on his forehead swelled terribly.

"Get out!" he said in an ominous, choking whisper. "I'll kill you!"

Metchik screamed and leaped out of the hut, hardly knowing what he was doing. Stashinsky instantly pulled himself together and turned towards Frolov.

"What . . . what is it?" Frolov asked, glancing fearfully at the glass out of the corner of his eye.

"It's your bromide. Take it," Stashinsky said in a stern, commanding voice.

Their eyes met, motionless, understanding, bound by the same thought. "It's the end," Frolov thought, and for some reason he was neither surprised nor afraid. Drained of all emotion, he felt no fear, no bitterness. Everything had turned out to be simple and easy; it even seemed strange to him that he should have wanted to suffer so much, that he had obstinately clung to life and feared death, when life promised him nothing but further sufferings, and death alone would release him from them. Undecided, he looked round, as if searching for something; his eyes fell on his untouched dinner, which stood on a stool near him. It was a milk jelly; it had grown cold, and there were flies hovering over it. For the first time since he was wounded, a human expression appeared in Frolov's eyes—pity for himself, or perhaps for Stashinsky. He lowered his eyelids, and when he raised them again his face was quiet and resigned.

"If you happen to be in Suchan," he said slowly, "tell them not to grieve too much. Everybody will go the same

way . . . yes, everybody . . ." he repeated the words, and it seemed that he was not yet utterly convinced of the inevitability of death for all men—a conviction which deprived his own particular death of its personal, isolated, terrible meaning and made it something normal and common to all men. After thinking a little, he said, "I've got a son there . . . in the pit . . . his name is Fedyá. He must be remembered when everything's over. . . . Help him get along and that sort of thing. Well, give it to me," he interrupted himself suddenly, his voice weak and trembling.

Stashinsky, with quivering white lips, his whole frame shuddering, one eye blinking terribly, gave him the glass. Frolov held it with both hands and drank.

Metchik, stumbling and falling over broken branches, ran through the forest, not caring where he went. He had lost his cap; wisps of hair hung over his eyes, repulsive and sticky like a cobweb; the blood was pounding in his temples, and with each throb he repeated a meaningless, pitiful word, clutching at it because there was nothing else to clutch at. Suddenly he ran into Varya and recoiled, his eyes blazing wildly.

"I've been looking for you," she began joyfully, and broke off, frightened by his insane look.

He grasped her hand and spoke in a rush:

"Listen! They've poisoned him . . . Frolov. . . . Do you know, they've——"

"What? Poisoned? Be quiet!" she cried, suddenly grasping the whole situation. She pressed him imperiously to her breast and clapped a hot, moist palm over his mouth. "Be quiet! Don't! Let's go away from here."

"Where? Oh, leave me alone!" He tore himself free and pushed her aside, his teeth chattering.

She grasped him again by the sleeve and dragged him along with her, repeating insistently, "Don't! Let's go away. They'll see us. There's a fellow hanging around here. . . . Come along, quick!"

Metchik again tore himself away, almost striking her.

"Where are you going? Wait!" she cried, running after him.

At this moment Siskin sprang out from the bushes; she darted aside and, jumping over a brook, disappeared in an alder grove.

"What happened? She didn't let you make her? Well, maybe I'll be more lucky!" He slapped his thigh and raced after Varya.

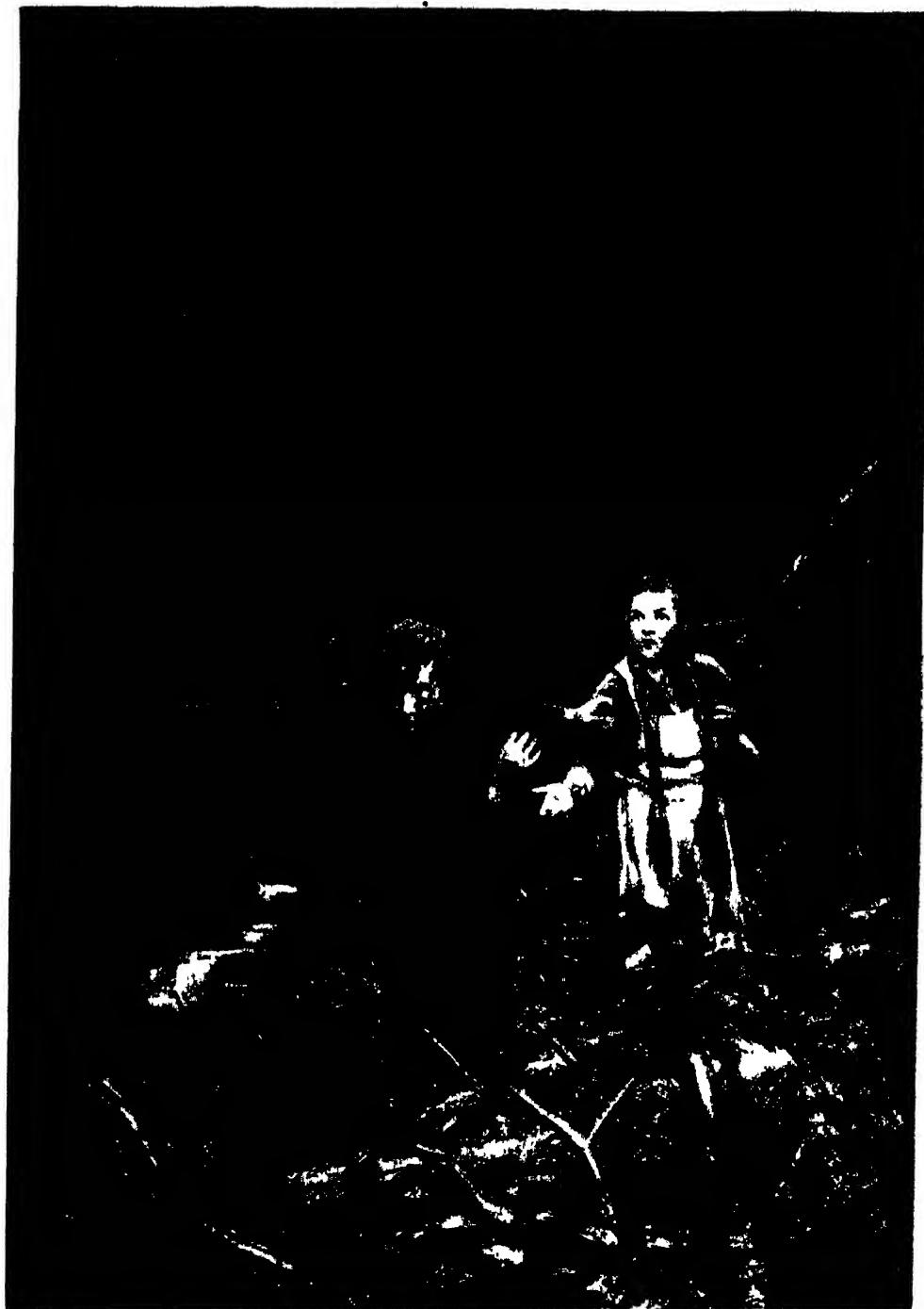




XII. THE MARCH

From his childhood Morozka had been accustomed to see people like Metchik concealing their thoughts, which were just as small and simple as his own, behind big and high-sounding words, thus separating themselves from those people who, like himself, could not dress their feelings prettily enough. Morozka did not know that he was correct in his assumptions, and he could not have put them into words; but he always felt between such people and himself an insurmountable wall of false and painted words and deeds that they built from Heaven knew what material.

So, in Metchik's memorable clash with Morozka, he had tried to show that if he left the field to Morozka it was only out of gratitude to him for having saved his life. The thought



that he, Metchik, had suppressed his own base feelings in favour of a man who was wholly unworthy of it filled him with a patient, pleasant sadness. In his heart, however, he was annoyed with himself and Morozka, because in reality he wished Morozka every sort of evil, but he could not cause him any harm—he was too much of a coward for that, and then, it was much more enjoyable to feel this patient sadness.

Morozka felt it was precisely because of this ability of beautifying the sordid, which he himself lacked, that Varya had preferred Metchik, since she was pleased to see in it not only a skin-deep beauty but a genuine beauty of the soul. It was for this reason that, when Morozka again met Varya, he involuntarily fell into his former, vicious circle of thoughts—of her, of himself, and of Metchik.

He saw that Varya had gone away somewhere (“with Metchik, of course”), and for a long time he could not sleep, though he tried to assure himself that it did not concern him in the least. With each faint sound he cautiously raised his head, staring into the darkness as if hoping to see two figures slinking guiltily out of the forest.

Later on he was awakened by a bustling near by. Damp windfall hissed in the camp-fire, and huge shadows danced over the clearing. The windows of the barrack hut were now lit up, now darkened; someone was striking a match. Then Kharchenko came out from the hut, exchanged a few words with a person invisible in the darkness, and walked among the camp-fires, looking for somebody.

“Who are you looking for?” Morozka asked hoarsely. He did not catch the answer, and asked again, “What’s that?”

“Frolov has died,” Kharchenko said in a muffled voice.

Morozka pulled his greatcoat tightly over him and again dropped off to sleep.

They buried Frolov shortly after daybreak; and Morozka, among others, indifferently threw earth into the grave.

When the horses were being saddled, it was discovered that Pika was missing. His little hook-nosed horse stood sadly under a tree; it had not been unsaddled the night

before and looked very pitiful. "The old geezer has cleared off, couldn't stand it any longer," Morozka concluded.

"All right, don't look for him," Levinson said, grimacing because of a pain in his side that had tormented him since early morning. "Don't forget about the horse . . . no, no, don't pack it. Where's the quartermaster? Everything ready? Mount!" He drew a deep sigh and, grimacing again, raised himself heavily in the saddle as though he carried within himself something so huge and heavy that he himself had become huge and heavy.

Nobody gave Pika a second thought; only Metchik felt he had suffered a loss. Although the old man had of late only bored him and stirred in him gloomy memories, there nevertheless remained a feeling that a part of himself had vanished together with Pika.

The company rode along the spine of a steep ridge, whose grass had been eaten by mountain goats. The cold bluish-grey sky spread over the ridge. Far below they could glimpse dark-blue valleys; large stones were dislodged by the horses' hoofs and rolled down.

Then they were embraced by the golden leaves and dry grasses of the taiga, steeped in the expectant stillness of autumn. The grey-bearded Siberian stag shed its hair in the yellow tracery of the branches; the cool springs sang; the dew hung all day on the bushes, translucent and pure, and yellowed by the leaves. The wild beasts of the taiga roared from early morning onwards, their voices disquieting and unbearably passionate; one could almost feel in the golden withering of the taiga the mighty breath of a monster endowed with eternal life.

The first person to suspect that there was something wrong between Morozka and Varya was the orderly Yefimka, who had been sent, shortly before the midday rest, with an order to Kubrak: "Draw in your tail, so that nobody nips it off."

With great difficulty Yefimka rode towards the column's end, tearing his pants on the prickly bushes, and quarrelled

with Kubrak. The platoon commander advised him not to poke his bloody nose under any tail. Yefimka had noticed on the way that Morozka and Varya rode at a considerable distance from each other, and it occurred to him that neither had he seen them together the whole of the previous day.

On his way back, he rode up to Morozka and remarked:

"I see you're running away from your wife. What did you have a row about?"

Morozka, confused and angry, looked at the other's dry and bilious face and said:

"What row? There was no row. I've left her."

"Left her!" For a few minutes Yefimka looked away, silently and gloomily, as if wondering whether the word "left" was appropriate, considering that there had been no real family bond between Morozka and Varya in their former relations.

"Well, that happens," he said at last. "It's a question of luck, I mean. Giddy-up, my little mare!" He whipped the horse smartly, and Morozka, following his woollen shirt with his eyes, saw him report to Levinson and then ride at his side.

"Eh, what a bloody life!" Morozka thought in a fit of utter despair, and he felt very sad, telling himself that here he was, chained to something, and could not, like other fellows, ride freely up and down the column or exchange remarks with a neighbour.

"They're lucky, they go about as they like," he thought enviously. "And what have they to worry about? Take Levinson, say—a big bug, everybody respects him, does what he wants. That's the life!"

Morozka had no way of knowing that Levinson suffered severely from a pain in his side, that he bore the responsibility for Frolov's death, that there was a price on his head and that he might therefore be the first to pay with his life. All that Morozka thought now was that the world was peopled with strong, calm, and contented men, while he didn't have any luck at all.

All the confused and wearisome thoughts which had first entered his head that hot July day, on his way back from the hospital, when the curly-headed mowers had admired his horsemanship, the thoughts which had taken complete possession of him when he had ridden along the deserted field after his clash with Metchik and had seen the lonely, homeless crow perched on the toppling stack—all these thoughts now assumed a new sharpness, a new torturing vividness they had never had before. Morozka felt that he had been cheated in his former life; and now, too, he saw nothing but falsehood and deception around him. He no longer doubted that the whole of his life, from swaddling clothes onwards—all that hard, senseless work and drunken revelry, all the blood and sweat he had shed, even all his “carefree” mischief-making, had brought him no joy, but had been the cheerless toil of a galley-slave, which nobody valued and nobody would ever value.

He thought with a tired, melancholy peevishness, almost with the resentment of an aging man, that he was already twenty-seven years old, and not one moment of the past could he return and live over again differently; that he could see nothing good ahead; that perhaps a bullet would soon end things for him, and he would die, unwept, like Frolov, whose death nobody had regretted. It appeared to Morozka now that all his life he had tried with his whole strength to follow the path—the straight, clear, true path—along which went men like Levinson, Baklanov, Dubov (even Yefimka, it seemed to him, went along this road now); but as for himself, somebody or other had always pushed him rudely off this path. And as it would never have occurred to him to think that the enemy who stood in his way was himself, it was peculiarly gratifying and bitter to him to think that he was suffering through the meanness of other people—people like Metchik most of all.

After dinner, while he was watering his horse at a stream, the boisterous, curly-headed fellow who had once stolen his tin mug came up to him with a secretive air.

"What I've got to tell you . . . what I'm going to tell you," he began to mumble rapidly. "Damn her hide. I mean Varya—yes, Varya. . . . I've got a nose for such things, brother!"

"What? For what things?" Morozka asked roughly, raising his head.

"For women. I know a lot about women!" the fellow explained, somewhat taken aback. "It's not anything serious yet, not anything serious, but they can't hide anything from me, not from me, brother. She can't take her eyes off him . . . keeps her eyes glued on him, she does. . . ."

"And what about him?" Morozka asked, flushing hotly, realizing that the other referred to Metchik and forgetting that he had to pretend to know nothing.

"Him? Why, nothing at all," the fellow said in an insincere, wary voice, as if everything he had just said was really unimportant and was meant only to expiate his former sins and win Morozka's forgiveness.

"The hell with them! What do I care!" Morozka spat out. "Maybe you've slept with her, too, for all I know!" he added contemptuously, stung to the quick.

"Well, I'll be damned! Why, I——"

"Clear off to your—— mother!" Morozka shouted in a sudden rage. "To hell with your nose! Hoof it, will you!" And he let fly a violent kick at the man's backside.

Mishka, scared by this sudden movement, jumped aside and, as he did so, his hind legs got into the stream. He stood stock-still, pricking his ears at the men.

"Ah, you son of a . . ." the fellow muttered breathlessly in rage and astonishment. Without finishing his words, he sprang at Morozka.

They grappled like badgers. Mishka, turning sharply, trotted away from them.

"I'll show you what you can do with your nose, you——!" Morozka growled, punching the other's sides with his fists and furious because the fellow hung on to him and he could not get in a good swinging blow.

"Look at them!" somebody boomed in a surprised voice above them. "Hey, what do you think you're doing?"

A pair of huge brawny arms was calmly wedged in between them and, seizing each of them by the collar, dragged them apart. Not understanding what was happening, they tried to close again, but now each of them received such a blow that Morozka flew aside and fell with his back against a tree, while the other, stumbling over a fallen branch and waving his arms wildly, sat down into the water.

"Give me your hand, I'll help you," Goncharenko said quite gravely. "That was a fine game you were playing."

"How did he dare . . . such skunks ought to . . . killing's too good for them . . ." Morozka yelled, trying to get at the dripping fellow, who was standing with a foolish expression on his face, holding on with one hand to Goncharenko. With the other he beat his breast and, furiously shaking his head and addressing Goncharenko alone, shouted, tearfully, "No, you just tell me, just tell me. . . . It means he can do this to anybody? If he wants . . . he can kick anybody's backside . . . anybody's backside? . . ." Observing that a crowd was gathering round them, he shrieked, "Is it anybody's fault if his wife . . . his wife. . . ."

Fearing scandal, still more afraid for Morozka's fate if Levinson should get wind of it, Goncharenko relinquished his hold of the shrieking fellow and, seizing Morozka by the arm, dragged him away.

"Come along!" he said sternly to Morozka, who was trying to free himself. "You'll see—they'll kick you out, you son of a bitch!"

Realizing at last that this stern and powerful man really sympathized with him, Morozka ceased struggling.

"What's happening here?" asked a blue-eyed German from Mctelitsa's platoon, running towards them.

"They've caught a bear," Goncharenko replied blandly.

"A bear?" The German's eyes bulged and, after standing motionless for a moment, he tore off at such speed that one might have supposed he was hurrying in for the kill.

For the first time Morozka looked at Goncharenko with curiosity and smiled.

"You're a strong brute!" he said, feeling a strange satisfaction in the thought.

"Why did you fight him?" the demolition man asked.

"How else . . . such skunks. . . ." Morozka grew excited again. "He ought to be——"

"Ah, well," Goncharenko broke in soothingly. "So he deserved it? Ah, well!"

"Get ready!" Baklanov shouted somewhere in a ringing voice which slipped suddenly from manly to boyish notes.

At this moment the shaggy head of Mishka peeped out from behind the bushes. Mishka looked at the men with his intelligent greenish-brown eyes and neighed quietly.

"Hi, friend!" Morozka cried out impulsively.

"That's a good horse you've got."

"I'd give up my life for him!" Morozka said, slapping Mishka's neck lovingly.

"Don't throw your life about so freely—you might need it." Goncharenko smiled faintly in his dark, curly beard. "I've still got to water my horse. Be seeing you." And he walked towards his horse with long, vigorous strides.

Morozka followed him with curious eyes. He wondered why he had not paid more attention in the past to such a remarkable man.

Later on, when the platoons lined up, Morozka, not quite knowing why he did so, fell into line by Goncharenko's side. He did not leave him during the whole journey to the Khau-nikhedza River.

Varya, Stashinsky, and Kharchenko, who had been attached to Kubrak's platoon, brought up the rear. At a bend in the mountain range the whole company could be seen stretched out in a long chain: in front, his body bent slightly forward, rode Levinson; behind him, unconsciously imitating his pose, rode Baklanov.

Throughout the journey Varya was conscious of Metchik's presence behind her; her annoyance at his behaviour of the

previous day rankled in her, stifling her warm, generous feeling for him.

From the day Metchik had left the hospital she had not for a moment forgotten his existence; she had lived only in the thought of their next meeting. With that thought her tenderest and most intimate dreams were bound up—dreams she would never have confessed, but which were so living, so earthly, almost tangible. She pictured to herself how he would appear before her at the edge of the taiga, wearing his shagreen blouse, handsome, graceful, fair, a little shy; she felt his breath on her, his soft wavy hair under her hand; she heard his soft, tender words. She tried not to remember their little tiffs; somehow it seemed to her that they would never fall apart again. In short, she imagined that their relationship in the future would be quite unlike what it had been in the past. It would be as pleasant as she could conceive it, and she tried not to think of the sad things which might really happen.

When she came across Metchik, she understood, with her peculiar sensitiveness to people's moods, that he was too distracted and too excited to control himself in front of her, and that the events which agitated him were much more important than any of her own personal injuries. But precisely because she had visualized this encounter in so different a light before, Metchik's unexpected rudeness hurt and frightened her.

For the first time Varya felt that this rudeness was not accidental, that Metchik, possibly, was not the man for whom she had waited so many long days and nights; but there was nobody else.

She had not the courage to confess this to herself at once; it was not easy to discard everything that she had lived through—her sufferings and her happiness—during those long days and nights, and to feel in her soul an emptiness which nothing could fill. And so she forced herself to think that nothing out of the way had happened, that everything

was due to Frolov's unfortunate death, that everything would soon be straightened out. But still she kept thinking from early morning of how Metchik had hurt her, and that he had no right to hurt her when she had come to him with her dreams and with her love.

The whole day she felt a torturing longing to see Metchik and to talk to him; but she did not once look back, and even during the halt for dinner she did not go up to him. "Why should I run after him like a little girl?" she thought. "If he really loves me, as he said he did, let him come first to me—I will not say a word of reproach. And if he doesn't come.... it's all the same, I'll be alone then."

On the main range the path widened out, and now Siskin slipped in beside Varya. The day before he had failed to catch her, but he was persistent in these matters and did not easily lose heart. She felt the touch of his knee; he breathed lewd words in her ear, but, lost in her own thoughts, she did not listen to him.

"Well, what do you say to that, lady?" Siskin said, insistently. (The word "lady" he applied to every woman, whatever her age, position, or his relationship to her.) "Do you agree, yes?"

"I understand everything. Do I ask anything of him?" Varya thought. "Was it really so difficult for him to be nice with me? But perhaps he is suffering, too, now, thinking that I'm angry with him. What if I talk to him? Not likely! After he drove me away! No, no, let nothing happen at all!"

"Are you deaf, my dear lady, or what? Do you agree, I ask you?"

"Agree to what?" Varya started. "Oh! You know where you can go."

"Well, that's a nice how-d'ye-do!" Siskin shrugged his shoulders with an offended air. "Don't try to act, my dear lady, as if it's the first time or you're just a baby." And he again began patiently to whisper in her ear, convinced that she heard and understood him, but was playing hard to get, like every other woman, to raise her price.

As the evening approached, the gullies grew dark; the horses snorted wearily; the mists grew thicker over the springs and crawled slowly into the valleys. Still Metchik did not come near Varya, and it was clear that he had no intention of doing so. And the more convinced she became that he would not come, the sharper grew her sense of the fruitlessness of her longing and of the bitterness of her earlier dreams, the more difficult it became to part with them.

The company came down for the night into a gully. Horses and men swarmed in the dank, timid shadows.

"So don't forget, my dear lady," Siskin urged, amorously and insolently persistent. "Yes, and I'll light a little fire away from the others. Remember this." A little later he shouted to somebody, "What do you mean 'where you going'? What are you doing here yourself, blocking up the way?"

"Where are *you* pushing? This isn't your platoon!"

"What do you mean—not mine? Open your blinkers!"

After a short silence, during which both of them were apparently "opening their blinkers," the fellow who had questioned Siskin said in a guilty voice:

"Damn it, it's the Kubrak fellows all right. But where's Metelitsa?" he asked; and feeling that the guilt in his tone had made amends for his error, he again shouted in a strained voice, "Met-el-itsa!"

Down below a man screamed in a voice so exasperated that it seemed likely he would either commit suicide or begin murdering people right and left if his demand were not met, "Light a fire, I tell you!!"

Suddenly, at the very bottom of the gully, the noiseless flame of a camp-fire flared up, snatching out of the darkness the shaggy heads of the horses, the tired faces of the men in the cold gleam of rifles and cartridge-belts.

Stashinsky, Varya, and Kharchenko rode to one side and dismounted.

"Well, now we'll rest and light a fire," Kharchenko announced with an affected cheerfulness which drew no re-

sponse from the others. "Let's all go and get some fire-wood. It's always the same—we never stop at the right time, and then suffer because of it," he argued in the same unconvincing voice, his hands fumbling in the wet grass. He was really suffering—from the dampness, the darkness, the fear that a snake would bite him, and from Stashinsky's gloomy silence. "I remember, when we were leaving Suchan, the same thing happened: we should have stopped for the night much earlier, it was pitch dark already, but we...."

"Why does he talk about all that now?" Varya asked herself. "Suchan ... they were leaving it ... it was pitch dark.... Who wants to hear about all that now? Everything's over now and nothing will happen." She was hungry now, and this only increased the dumb and crushing emptiness she felt, which nothing in the world could fill. She was hardly able to control her tears.

However, when they had eaten and got warm, all three of them became more cheerful, and the bluish-black world which surrounded them, strange and cold, seemed already to have become familiar, warm, and cozy.

"Here's my greatcoat, my grand old greatcoat!" Kharchenko declaimed in a sated voice, undoing his pack. "It doesn't burn in fire and doesn't drown in water. It wouldn't be bad if I had a woman to share it with me." He winked and laughed.

"Why am I so hard on the boy?" Varya thought, feeling her usual good nature and friendliness were returning to her as a result of the cheery fire, the porridge she had eaten, and Kharchenko's horny talk. "Nothing special happened after all. What upset me so? And the boy's sitting there lonely because of my foolishness. I just have to go up to him and everything will be as it was at first."

And suddenly she felt that she did not at all want to harbour resentment and evil thoughts against him and to suffer from them herself, when everybody around was so contented and nobody worried their heads about anything, and when she, too, might be thoughtlessly happy. There and

then she made up her mind to cast all other things from her head and go to Metchik; now she no longer saw anything humiliating about such a step.

"I want nothing," she thought, cheering up instantly, "if only he wants me and loves me, if only he will stay near me. Yes, I'd give everything, if only he always rides next to me, talks to me, sleeps with me... he's so young and handsome...."

Metchik and Siskin had made a camp-fire apart from the others. Too lazy to cook their supper, they contented themselves with grilling some fat bacon. This they attacked with such zest, forgetting almost completely about bread, that when they had finished their supper they were still hungry.

Metchik had not fully recovered from the death of Frolov and the disappearance of Pika. The whole day he had felt as if he were swimming in a mist made up of strange and troubled thoughts of loneliness and death. Towards evening this curtain of mist fell, but he did not want to see anybody and was afraid of everybody.

Varya found their camp-fire with some difficulty. The whole gully was lit by these camp-fires, with the men singing in their smoke.

"Ah, that's where you're hiding!" she said, coming out of the bushes, her heart beating fast.

Metchik started; he glanced at her with cold, frightened eyes, and turned back towards the fire.

"Hi!" said Siskin with a pleasant grin. "We've missed you. Sit down, dear lady, sit down!"

Excitedly he drew aside his greatcoat, inviting her to sit down beside him. She did not accept the invitation. The man's natural vulgarity, something she had sensed instinctively in him from the first, though she had not known exactly what it was, was particularly repugnant to her now.

"I came to see how you were, since you've forgotten all about us," she said in a melodious, agitated voice, speaking to Metchik alone and not hiding the fact that she had come only for his sake. "Kharchenko has been asking after you,

how you were getting on . . . says the fellow was seriously wounded, but he seems to be making out all right. Not to mention myself. . . .”

Metchik shrugged his shoulders and said nothing.

“Tell them we’re getting on splendidly—no question about it!” Siskin exclaimed, eagerly taking the conversation upon himself. “But come, sit down here, lady, don’t be shy!”

“That’s all right, I just came for a minute,” she said. “I was just passing by.” She felt insulted: she had come because of Metchik, and he just shrugged his shoulders. She added, “I see you haven’t eaten anything; your mess-tin is quite clean.”

“What is there to eat! If they’d only give us decent rations, but they issue the devil knows what!” Siskin grimaced fastidiously. “Come on, sit down by my side!” he urged her again, desperately hospitable, and seizing her by the hand, pulled her towards him. “Sit down, lady, will you!”

She sat down next to him on his greatcoat.

“You remember your promise?” Siskin winked suggestively.

“What promise?” she asked in alarm, half-realizing what the man was driving at. “Oh, I shouldn’t have come,” she thought suddenly, and something big and oppressive seemed to grow within her.

“What do you mean—what promise? Ah, I see; I’ll tell you in a jiffy.” Siskin leaned hastily to Metchik. “Though it isn’t good form to have secrets in company,” he said, putting a hand around Metchik’s shoulders and turning back to Varya, “still. . . .”

“Secrets? Go on!” she said with a forced smile, blinking rapidly, and for some reason began to put up her hair with numb, trembling fingers.

“Why the devil are you sitting here like a seal?” Siskin whispered hurriedly in Metchik’s ear. “We’ve arranged it all, and you. . . .”

Metchik recoiled from Siskin, shot a glance at Varya, and flushed crimson. “Well, are you satisfied now? You see what’s

going on?" her misty, reproachful look seemed to ask him.

"No, no, I'm going ... no, no, ..." she murmured as soon as Siskin turned back to her, as though he had already suggested something shameful and degrading. "No, no, I'm going." She jumped up and went off with small, rapid steps, her head drooping low, and soon vanished in the darkness.

"You've spoiled everything again for both of us, you bungler!" Siskin hissed furiously, full of contempt for Metchik. Suddenly he sprang up, as if some elemental force were released within him, and rushed after Varya in great bounds.

He caught up with her and, embracing her tightly with one arm, dragged her into the bushes, saying, "Come along, dear lady, come on, little girl."

"Let me go, leave me alone. I'll scream," she begged him, weakening and almost crying, yet feeling that she had not the strength to shout and that there was no need to shout now: why should she? for whom?

"Come on, dear lady, why scream?" Siskin went on, putting a hand over her mouth, and becoming more and more excited with his own tenderness.

"That's true—why should I scream? What good will it do now?" she thought, very tired. "But this is Siskin. Siskin! Why him? Oh, what does it matter!"

And indeed she became indifferent to everything.





XIII. THEIR BURDENS

“I don’t like them, those peasants. I simply can’t stand them,” said Morozka, swaying rhythmically in the saddle. Every time Mishka raised his right foreleg Morozka whipped the quivering bright yellow leaves of the birch-trees. “I remember I used to go to see old Grandpa—there were two uncles of mine there as well . . . ploughed the fields, too. No, I can’t stand them. They’re not like our fellows—their blood is different: they’re stingy, and cunning, too. That’s a fact!” Having missed a birch-tree, Morozka slapped his boot with the whip in order to keep time. “And what good does it do them to be cunning and stingy?” he asked, raising his head. “Why, they haven’t got any bloody worth-while property to their name! They’re just beggars!” And he laughed with the

air of a naive and pitying outsider deplored the peasants' poverty.

Goncharenko listened, his eyes fixed on the space between his horse's ears. The firm, intelligent expression in his eyes was that of a man who knew how to be a good listener and how to reflect on what he heard.

"But I think if you was to scratch us a bit," he said unexpectedly, "anyone of us,"—the word "us" he stressed with a glance at Morozka,—"me, say, or you, or Dubov there—you'll find a peasant in everyone. Yes, you will," he repeated with conviction. "A peasant with all the guts of a peasant, and everything else except bast shoes."

"What's that you're talking about?" Dubov asked, turning to him.

"Or perhaps even with bast shoes. . . . We're talking about the peasants, and I say there's a peasant in every one of us."

"That so?" Dubov said doubtfully.

"How else? Morozka, say, has got a grandfather in the village and a couple of uncles. You——"

"Friend, I've got nobody," Dubov broke in. "And thank God for that! I don't love that breed, I admit. Take Kubrak, for instance. The man himself—well, you can't expect everybody to have brains—but look who he's got in his platoon!" Dubov spat contemptuously.

This conversation took place on the fifth day of the march, when the company had come down to the source of the Khaunikhedza. They were riding along an old winter road covered with soft, withered knot-grass. Though not a soul had a crumb left from the stores which the assistant quartermaster had taken at the hospital, all of them were in a good mood, believing that rest and shelter were not far distant.

"Did you hear what he said?" Morozka asked, winking. "Dubov ought to know, eh, old fellow?" And he laughed, surprised and delighted because the platoon commander had agreed with him and not with Goncharenko.

"That's not the way to talk about our people," the demolition man said, not at all put out. "All right, you've got no



relations in the village—that's not the point. I haven't got anybody left there now, either. But take the men in our pit. You come from over the Urals, it's true, but what about Morozka, for instance? He's seen hardly anything at all except his pit."

"What d'you mean—seen nothing at all?" Morozka demanded, taking offence. "Why, at the front I——"

"Shut up!" Dubov interrupted him, waving a hand. "Let him have his say."

"Your pit is nothing but a village," Goncharenko said calmly. "First thing, everyone's got his own garden. Half of your people come to work in wintertime and go back to their villages in summer. Why, even the stags there cry like pigs in a sty. I've been to your pit and I know."

"A village, you say?" Dubov asked, astonished, not keeping up with Goncharenko.

"What else? Your wives fuss in the gardens, and all the people about are peasants. Don't you think that has an influence? Of course it has!" And with his habitual gesture the blaster cut the air with the palm of his hand.

"It counts, of course," Dubov said uncertainly, wondering if there was not something disgraceful in this for the "coal-eaters."

"Well, so that's that. Now take the town. Are our towns big, and have we got many of them? For thousands of versts—nothing but villages all the way. Does that have an influence?"

"Wait!" the platoon commander said, confused. "Thousands of versts, you say? Nothing but villages? Yes, you're right there: it does have an influence. So what?"

"Well, it all boils down to one thing—that there's a bit of the peasant in every one of us," said Goncharenko, returning to his point of departure, having thus countered every point that Dubov had raised.

"Put it all in a nutshell!" Morozka cried admiringly. From the moment Dubov had intervened, the discussion had interested him only from the viewpoint of the wit of the dis-

putants. "He's got you down, old fellow, and you can't hit back!"

"All this goes to show," Goncharenko explained, without giving Dubov time to recover, "that we—and you, too, Morozka—ought not to put on airs in front of the peasant. Why, without the peasant we would...." He shook his head and was silent, and it was plain that all Dubov said afterwards could not induce him to change his opinion.

"Brainy devil!" Morozka thought, looking stealthily at Goncharenko and feeling an increasing respect for him. "He cornered the old man so, he couldn't budge." Morozka realized that Goncharenko, like everybody else, was apt to make mistakes, was not always right—for instance, Morozka was not at all certain that he carried a bit of a peasant inside him, though Goncharenko seemed to be sure of it; nevertheless he put more confidence in the blaster than in anyone else. Goncharenko, as Morozka saw him, was "one of the boys"; he was a man who could "understand"; and, what was more, he did not go in for empty chatter and was no idler. His big brawny hands always Itched for work; at a first glance they seemed to work slowly, but actually they were remarkably deft; their every movement was well ordered and precise.

The relationship between Morozka and Goncharenko reached that first stage of a true partisan friendship at which their mates said of them, "They sleep under the same great-coat, they eat from the same dish."

Thanks to his daily association with Goncharenko, Morozka began to look upon himself, too, as a conscientious partisan: his horse was well-groomed, the harness was in good order; his rifle was polished and shone like a mirror; he was always ahead of the others in combat and could always be relied upon, and so he was liked and respected by his mates. And this really drew him unwittingly into the healthy and sensible life which, it seemed to him, Goncharenko lived---a life in which there was no place for useless and idle thoughts.

"Stop! Stop!" the men in front shouted. The order was taken up along the whole column. The men in front stopped, but those in the rear pressed forward, breaking the chain. "Call Metelitsa!" another shout was passed over. A few seconds later, swooping like a vulture, Metelitsa flew past, and the eyes of the whole detachment followed him with unconscious pride in his fine shepherd's horsemanship, which had no relation to any military school of riding.

"I suppose I'll go there myself and see what's afoot," Dubov said.

He returned a little later, exasperated, but trying nevertheless to conceal his anger.

"Metelitsa is going out on reconnaissance, and we're to spend the night here," he said, restraining himself, but with furious and hungry notes in his voice.

"How's that? Without eating? What are they thinking of over there?" the men around cried. "They call this resting!"

"Bloody luck!" Morozka joined in.

The men in front were already dismounting.

Levinson decided to camp for the night in the taiga because he was not convinced that the lower reaches of the Khaunikhedza were unoccupied by the enemy. However, he hoped that even if the enemy were there he would be able to grope his way through to the Tudo-Vaku valley, where horses and grain were plentiful.

During the whole journey he had been tortured by the insufferable pain in his side, which grew worse from day to day; he knew by now that this pain, due to fatigue and anaemia, could be dispelled only by weeks of rest and healthy diet. But since he was even more certain that it would be a long time before he enjoyed a good rest and good food, he tried during the whole journey to adapt himself to his new state, assuring himself that it was "just a trifling indisposition," that he had always suffered from it, and that it could not therefore possibly prevent him from

accomplishing the work which he felt it was his duty to perform.

"And I say we ought to go on," Kubrak repeated for the fourth time, not listening to Levinson and staring at his fur boots with the blunt obstinacy of a man who refused to consider anything but his desire to eat.

"Well, if you can't wait, you can go on. Just leave somebody in charge in your place and ride on by yourself. But there's no point in leading the whole company into danger."

Levinson's tone suggested that Kubrak had insisted on just that course of action.

"You'd better go and see about posting sentries, brother," he added, ignoring a further remark of the platoon commander. But seeing that Kubrak was prepared to insist, he suddenly frowned and asked sternly, "What?"

Kubrak raised his head and blinked.

"Send a mounted patrol down the road," Levinson went on, with the habitual note of faint mockery in his voice. "And post sentries about half a verst in the rear, say, at the stream we crossed. Is that clear?"

"Yes," Kubrak growled, wondering why he was saying this instead of what he wanted to say. "The bloody stayer!" he thought, his unconscious dislike for Levinson tempered by respect and mixed with pity for himself.

Waking suddenly in the night, as he had often done of late, Levinson remembered his talk with Kubrak. He lighted a cigarette and went to inspect the sentries.

He tried to avoid stepping on the greatcoats of the sleeping men as he picked his way among the smouldering campfires. The fire farthest to the right was burning more brightly than the rest; the camp guard squatted there, stretching out the palms of his hands to the blaze. It was plain that his thoughts were far away; his dark sheepskin hat had slipped to the back of his head, his eyes were wide open and dreamy, and his lips were spread in a gentle, childish smile. "Just look at him!" Levinson thought, choosing precisely these

words for some reason to express the vague mixed feeling of delight and apprehension which seized him at the sight of these blue, smouldering fires and the smiling guard, and at the thought of the lurking dangers which awaited him in the night.

He went on even more carefully and warily, not because he wanted to remain unobserved, but so that he might not frighten the smile off the guard's face. The latter, still lost in his thoughts, continued to smile at the fire. No doubt this fire and the crunching sounds of the horses munching the wet grass in the taiga recalled to him the nights he had spent as a child with the horses in the fields, the dewy meadows in the moonlight, the distant crowing of cocks in the village, the peacefully grazing herd, its rattling hobbles, the darting blaze of the fire before his childish, wondering eyes. That fire had died down long ago, but in the guard's memory it burned brighter and warmer than the fire now before him.

Levinson had scarcely left the camp when a damp, odorous darkness closed in on him; his feet sank in something resilient; the night smelled of mushrooms and rotting wood. "Pretty scary!" he thought, and looked back. No golden glow could be seen now; the entire camp together with the smiling guard seemed to have vanished into the earth. Levinson sighed deeply, and went forward along the path with a light-heartedness he did not feel.

Soon he heard the quiet murmuring of the brook. He stood still for a few minutes, listening to the soft sounds of the dark taiga; then, smiling to himself, he went on more quickly, deliberately shuffling his feet so that he might be heard.

"Who's there? Who's there?" a shaky voice came out of the darkness.

Levinson recognized the voice of Metchik and, without answering, went straight towards him. In the hushed darkness the bolt of a rifle rattled; there was a grating noise as the cartridge got stuck. Levinson could almost see the frantic

movement of Metchik's hands, trying to drive the cartridge home.

"You should oil it more often," Levinson said dryly.

"Oh, it's you!" Metchik said with relief. "No... I do oil it... I have no idea what's gone wrong...." He looked at the commander in embarrassment and, forgetting that the bolt wasn't in place, lowered his rifle.

Metchik had been put on the third sentry shift, which began at midnight. Not more than half an hour had passed—though it had seemed much longer to Metchik—since the footfalls of the commander of the guard, returning to the camp, had died away in the grass. He was alone with his thoughts in a vast alien world in which everything moved slowly and stealthily and everything lived a strange, watchful and rapacious life.

He had been occupied all this time with only one thought, born he knew not when or where, to which he returned unceasingly, no matter what other thoughts filled his mind. He knew that he would never utter this thought to a soul; he knew, too, that the thought was evil and shameful, but he realized at the same time that he would never part with it, would do everything in his power to fulfil his plan; it was the last and the only thing that remained to him.

The plan amounted to this: by hook or by crook, and in any case as quickly as possible, he must get away from the detachment.

His earlier life in the town, which he had once thought so joyless and tedious, now that he thought he might return to it, seemed happy and carefree, and indeed the only possible life for him.

When he recognized Levinson, Metchik was embarrassed, not so much because his rifle was out of order, but because he had been taken unawares with these thoughts.

"A fine soldier you are!" said Levinson good-naturedly. He still saw the smiling camp guard and did not want to be angry. "It's a bit scary, standing here alone, isn't it?"

"No . . . why?" Metchik murmured in confusion. "I've got used to it already."

"And I can never get used to it," said Levinson with a smile. "I've walked alone and ridden so many times by myself, night and day, and still it's scary. Well, everything quiet here?"

"Yes, it is," Metchik said, looking at him in surprise and somewhat timidly.

"That's all right, you'll see that things will soon be better," Levinson remarked, commenting, it seemed, not on Metchik's words, but rather on what was concealed beneath them. "If only we can get through to the Tudo-Vaku. It'll be better there. D'you smoke? No?"

"No. Only now and again," Metchik added hurriedly, remembering Varya's tobacco pouch, although he knew that Levinson could not possibly know of its existence.

"Don't you ever feel like smoking? Kanunnikov—that was a good partisan we had; he couldn't live an hour without tobacco. I wonder if he got safely to town."

"Why did he go there?" Metchik asked, and his heart began to beat quickly as a vague thought flashed through his mind.

"I sent him there with a message. It's pretty dangerous now. And he carried our report."

"But you can send someone else," Metchik said in an unnatural voice, trying to make the words sound casual. "Aren't you thinking of sending someone?"

"Why?" Levinson asked, instantly on the alert.

"Oh, I just asked. If you are—I could take your message there. I know the town very well."

Metchik feared that he had been too hasty and that Levinson knew everything now.

"No, I don't think I will," Levinson drawled thoughtfully. "Got relatives there?"

"No, but I used to work there. That is, I do have relatives there, but it isn't because of that. No, you can rely on me."

When I worked in the town I often had to carry secret papers."

"Who did you work with?"

"I used to work with the Maximalists, but I thought at the time that it didn't really matter."

"What do you mean—it didn't matter?"

"I mean it didn't matter whom you worked with."

"And now?"

"And now I don't know what's right and what's wrong," Metchik said faintly, not knowing what answer was expected of him.

"So-o-o!" Levinson drawled, as if these words of Metchik's were precisely what he had expected. "No, no, I'm not thinking of sending anyone to town just yet," he added.

"No . . . you see why I brought it up . . ." Metchik burst out with sudden, almost hysterical resolution, his voice shaking. "Only don't think badly of me, and don't think I'm hiding anything. I'll be quite frank with you."

"I'll tell him everything now," he thought, and he really felt that he wanted to make a clean breast of everything, though he did not know whether this was a wise or foolish thing to do.

"I brought it up also because it seems to me that I'm a poor and useless partisan, and it would be better if you sent me away. Don't think I'm afraid or that I'm hiding anything from you, but it's just that I can't do anything properly and don't understand anything. That's why I can't make friends with anyone here—not with a single soul. I haven't anyone I could turn to for help. And that isn't my fault, is it? I approached everyone with an open heart, but all I got in return was coarseness, mockery, and contempt, though I was in the fighting with all of them, and was badly wounded, as you know. I don't believe anybody. If I were stronger, I know they'd listen to me, they'd be afraid of me, because that's the only thing they like here. Everyone thinks of only

stuffing his belly, even if they have to steal from their comrades; nobody bothers about anything else. It even seems to me sometimes that if they happened to fall into Kolchak's hands tomorrow, they'd serve Kolchak just as readily, and they'd treat everybody just as cruelly. But I can't, I can't be like that! . . ."

It seemed to Metchik that every word he spoke made a new rent in a veil of fog in front of him; the words gushed freely through these rents, widening them, and he felt a peculiar relief. He wanted to talk on and on, and he was quite indifferent by now to whatever Levinson might think of it all.

"So that's the sort of fellow you are! What a muddle!" Levinson thought, with growing curiosity trying to discover what was at the back of Metchik's hysterical outburst.

"Wait a bit!" he said at last, touching the other's sleeve. Metchik became acutely conscious that Levinson's large dark eyes were fixed on him. "You've said such a lot, brother, that I can't make head or tail of it. Let's stop there. Let's take the most important thing: you say that everybody here thinks only about stuffing his belly——"

"Why, no!" cried Metchik. He was certain that the most important thing he had said was not that at all; the most important thing was his intolerable life here, the injustices he suffered from everyone, and the fact that he was speaking with commendable candour about it. "I wanted to say——"

"No, you wait; it's my turn to speak now," Levinson gently interrupted him. "You said that everybody here thinks only about stuffing his belly, and that if we happened to fall into Kolchak's hands——"

"No, I said nothing about you personally . . . I——"

"That makes no difference. If they got into Kolchak's hands, you said, they'd fight for Kolchak just as cruelly and senselessly? But that's completely wrong!" And Levinson began to put forward his usual arguments to explain why it seemed wrong to him.

The longer he spoke the more clearly he saw that he was wasting his words. The occasional remarks Metchik threw in made him realize that he ought to be speaking of something which was more fundamental and elementary, something which he himself in his time had come to understand not without difficulty, and which was now part of his flesh and blood. But this was not the proper time to speak of these things because every moment demanded swift and resolute action.

"Well, there isn't anything I can do about you," he said at last, with a severity not unmixed with kindness and pity. "You've only got yourself to blame. And you can't go anywhere. It would be a stupid thing—they'd kill you, that's all. You'd better think it over, particularly what I've said. It'll do you good."

"That's all I do think about," Metchik said gloomily, and the nervous strength which had prompted him to speak boldly and volubly at once evaporated.

"Above all, don't think your mates are any worse than you.... They're not...."

Levinson slowly took out his tobacco pouch and began to roll a cigarette.

Metchik watched Levinson listlessly and despairingly.

"And you'd better lock your bolt," Levinson said unexpectedly, and it was clear that he had borne the open bolt in his mind during the entire conversation. "It's time you got used to such things—you're not at home, you know." He struck a match, and his half-closed eyes with their long lashes, his delicate nostrils, and insignificant reddish beard were illuminated for a brief moment. "By the way, how is your mare? Do you still ride her?"

"Yes."

Levinson thought a moment. "All right, tomorrow I'll let you have Nivka—d'you know her? Pika used to ride her. And you'll hand Zyuchikha over to the quartermaster. Will that do?"

"That'll do," Metchik said despondently.

"What a muddle-headed fellow he is!" Levinson thought afterwards, as he stepped softly and cautiously in the dark grass and puffed rapidly at his cigarette. He was somewhat upset by the conversation. He thought that Metchik was, after all, feeble, lazy, weak-willed. What a shame it was that such poor and unfortunate people were born and lived in the country. "Yes, while millions of people in our country," he thought, quickening his pace and puffing even more rapidly at his cigarette, "live in dirt and poverty, under a slow and indolent sun, ploughing with primitive wooden ploughs, believing in a cruel and senseless old God, such lazy and weak-willed people, such good-for-nothings will be born in it."

And Levinson was agitated, because these were his deep and most intimate thoughts; because the chief meaning of his own life lay in overcoming this pettiness and poverty; because there would have been no Levinson at all, but someone else, if he were not urged by an overpowering desire, stronger than any other desire, to live to see men become stronger, kinder, and more beautiful. But how could one hope to see these new and beautiful men when numberless millions of people were still forced to live such wretched, primitive, and petty lives?

"Could I really have been at all like him once?" Levinson wondered, his thoughts returning to Metchik. He tried to remember what he had been like in his childhood and in his early youth, but could do this only with great difficulty—so thick and significant were the topmost layers, those of later years, when he already became the Levinson whom everybody knew as *Levinson*, the man who always marched in the vanguard.

The only thing he could clearly see in the past was an old photograph of a skinny Jewish boy with large, ingenuous eyes, wearing a black jacket, who looked with surprising, unchildish intenness at the spot in the camera where

he had been told a pretty little bird would fly out. The bird didn't fly out, and he remembered that he had almost cried with disappointment. But how many more such disappointments he had suffered before he had finally been convinced that "life isn't like that"!

And when he was really convinced, he understood what untold misery men suffer because of these lying tales about pretty little birds—pretty little birds which are expected to fly out from somewhere or other and which never do appear, though many people spend their lives waiting for them. No, he had no further need for them! Relentlessly he had suppressed all sweet and vain regrets for them—all that he had inherited from past generations brought up on these lying tales of pretty little birds. To see everything as it is, in order to change everything that is, to hasten what must be born and must be—this wisdom, the simplest and most difficult of all, Levinson had finally achieved.

"But, after all, I was a tough fellow, much tougher than him," he thought now, with an inexplicable feeling of joyful triumph which nobody would have expected from him, nobody would have understood. "I not only wanted a lot, I could also do a lot. Yes, that's the most important thing."

He struck out straight across the taiga; the cold dewy branches freshened his face; he felt a surge of unusual strength, which seemed to bear him to a great height, and from this height, earthly and human, he mastered his own weak flesh, his own illness.

When Levinson reached the camp, the fires had died down. The camp guard was smiling no longer—he could be heard attending to his horse, muttering curses. Levinson made his way to his own fire, which still smouldered faintly. Near it, wrapped in his greatcoat, Baklanov lay in deep, untroubled sleep; Levinson threw in some dry grass and branches and fanned the flames with his breath. His head grew dizzy with the exertion. Baklanov felt the warmth, stirred, and smacked

his lips in his sleep; his face was uncovered; the lips pouted childishly; his cap, pressed against his temple, stood upright. He looked like a large, well-fed, good-natured puppy. "Just look at him!" Levinson thought, smiling affectionately. After his talk with Metchik it was somehow particularly pleasant to look at Baklanov.

He lay down at Baklanov's side, grunting, and he had barely closed his eyes when he seemed to be spinning, rocking, and floating away somewhere, unconscious of his body, until suddenly he plunged into a bottomless black pit.





XIV. METELITSA GOES ON RECONNAISSANCE

When Levinson sent Metelitsa out on reconnaissance he ordered him to return at all costs that same night. But the village to which the platoon commander had been sent was actually much farther away than Levinson had supposed; Metelitsa left the company at about four o'clock in the afternoon and had galloped most of the way, his body bent over the horse's neck like a bird of prey, his sharp nostrils dilating joyfully and wickedly, as if he were intoxicated by this mad gallop after five slow and tedious days. But twilight came, and still the rustling grasses of the autumn taiga sped past him in the cold, mournful light of the dying day. It was already quite dark when at last he emerged from the taiga and drew in his stallion by an old and tumble-down shed,

the roof of which had fallen in, and which had obviously remained empty for years.

He tied up the horse and, holding on to the crumbling logs, climbed up to one of the corners of the shed, almost falling into the dark hole in place of the roof, from which came the sickening smell of slimy wood and smothered grass. gingerly he stood there, his knees half-bent, gazing intently into the night and listening to its sounds. For about ten minutes he stood thus, his figure blended with the dark background of the forest, looking more than ever like a bird of prey. A frowning valley studded with dark groves and haystacks lay before him, squeezed between two rows of volcanic mountains, which made a heavy black mass against the hostile, starry sky.

Metelitsa jumped down into the saddle and rode out into the road. Its unused, dark ruts were barely visible in the tall grass. The slender trunks of the birch-trees stood out whitely in the darkness like extinguished candles.

He rode to the top of a hillock. On his left stretched the black row of volcanic mountains, curved like the back of a huge monster; a river murmured somewhere. About two versts away, probably on its bank, a bonfire was burning; it reminded Metelitsa of the lonely life of a shepherd. Farther along, and across the road, shone the unblinking yellow lights of a village. The row of the mountains on the right receded and disappeared in the blue darkness. The ground fell sharply in that direction; it was probably an old river bed; a sombre forest lined the bank.

"It must be marshland there," Metelitsa thought. He felt cold; over his army tunic, which was buttonless and open at the neck, he was wearing a soldier's jacket, which also hung open. He decided to make first of all for the bonfire. He took his revolver from the holster and stuck it into his belt under the jacket, hiding the holster in a pack behind the saddle. He had no rifle. He looked now like a peasant returning from the fields: after the war with the Germans many of them wore soldiers' jackets.

He was quite close to the bonfire when suddenly a horse's restless neighing pierced the night. His stallion sprang forward, its powerful frame shivering, and neighed passionately and plaintively in return. At the same moment a shadow lunged abruptly across the flame. Metelitsa lashed his horse. It reared.

By the fire, staring with terrified eyes, stood a thin, black-haired boy. He held a whip in one hand, and as if in defence raised the other, from which his sleeve hung loosely. He wore bast shoes, tattered pants, and a long jacket wrapped about him and girded with a string of hemp. Metelitsa furiously drew in his horse in front of the boy's very nose, almost knocking him down, and was about to shout savagely at him when he suddenly caught sight of the terrified eyes above the loose and trembling sleeve, the pants through which the boy's bare knees showed, and his shabby jacket, which his master must have given him, and from which a thin, childish neck stuck out guiltily and pitifully.

"What are you standing there for? Got frightened? Ah, you little devil, you little fool!" Metelitsa said in confusion, in the kind, gruff tones he usually reserved for his horses, and never used with men. "Standing there as if his number's up! And what if I knocked you down, eh? What a fool you are!" he repeated, softening and suddenly feeling, at the sight of the boy and his wretchedness, something waking in him, just as pitiful, ridiculous and childish.

Slowly recovering from the shock, the boy lowered his arm. "And why did you swoop down on me like a hawk?" he said, trying to speak as reasonably and independently as a grown-up, but still shaking. "Anyone would be frightened," he went on. "I've got horses here."

"Horses!" Metelitsa drawled mockingly. "Is that so?" He planted his fists on his hips, leaned back, looking at the boy with half-shut eyes and twitching his satiny, mobile eyebrows, and suddenly burst into laughter so frank and loud, so kindly and jolly, that he himself was surprised at the sounds which issued from him.

The boy sniffed sheepishly, still mistrustful, but then, realizing that there was nothing to fear, and that everything on the contrary had turned out to be awfully funny, he wrinkled his face so that his nose jumped up, and burst into childish laughter, thin and mischievous. This unexpected rejoinder made Metelitsa laugh even louder, and soon both of them were provoking each other to fresh merriment, which lasted for several minutes—Metelitsa rocking backwards and forwards in the saddle, the boy, having fallen down on his backside and leaning on the palms of his hands, kicking his feet in the air with each fresh paroxysm of laughter.

"Well, you've certainly made me laugh, young man!" Metelitsa said at last, slipping one foot from the stirrup. "You're a funny lad, you are!" He jumped to the ground and stretched out his hands to the fire.

The boy stopped laughing and looked at him in grave and happy amazement, as though expecting further incredible tricks from him. "You're a merry devil!" he said at last, intoning each syllable carefully as if pronouncing a final verdict.

"Me?" Metelitsa grinned. "Yes, I'm merry, brother."

"And I was so frightened," the boy confessed. "I've got horses here, and I was baking some potatoes."

"Potatoes? That's fine!" Metelitsa sat down next to him, still holding the bridle. "Where do you get them from, your potatoes?"

"Where? Why, there's heaps of them here!" And the boy waved his arms about him.

"Meaning you steal them?"

"Of course. Let me hold your horse for you. Is it a colt? Don't be afraid, he'll not run away from me. He's a good horse," the boy said, casting an experienced eye at its shapely body, slender and muscular. "Where do you come from?"

"He's not a bad horse," Metelitsa agreed. "And where do you come from?"

"From over there." The boy nodded his head in the direction of the lights of the village. "Khaunikhedza—that's our village. It's got a hundred and twenty houses—no more, no less," he said, evidently repeating an expression he had heard somebody else use. He spat.

"I see. And I'm from Vorobyovka that's over the range. Heard of it?"

"Vorobyovka? No. It's a long way off, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is."

"And why have you come here?"

"Well, you see.... It's a long story, brother. I was thinking of buying some horses here. They say you've got plenty of them here. I love horses, brother," said Metelitsa with prodigious cunning. "All my life I've had to look after them, but they were other people's horses."

"You don't think these are mine? They're my master's." The boy slipped a thin, dirty little hand out of his sleeve and deftly stirred the ashes of the fire with the handle of his whip. Black potatoes rolled out from the ashes. "Perhaps you're hungry, eh?" he asked. "I've got some bread, too, though not very much of it."

"Thanks, I've just filled myself up this high," Metelitsa lied, drawing a hand across his throat. He realized only now how hungry he was.

The boy broke open a potato, blew on it, stuffed a half into his mouth—together with the skin—rolling it on his tongue, and began to chew with a healthy appetite, moving his pointed little ears. Swallowing it, he looked at Metelitsa, and in the same deliberate way in which he had defined him as a merry devil, he said, "I'm an orphan. Been an orphan for six months now. Dad was killed by the Cossacks, and my mother was raped and then killed, too, and then they killed my brother."

"Cossacks?" Metelitsa asked, immediately on the alert.

"Yes. They killed them all for nothing. And they burned down the house—and not only our house but twelve other houses, not less. And they come here every month. About

forty of them are billeted there right now. And at Rakitnoye—that's a big village next to ours—there's been a whole regiment there all the summer. The things they do to people! Here, have some potatoes."

"How is it you didn't run away? Look what a big forest you've got here!" Metelitsa even raised himself slightly to look at the forest.

"What of it? You can't sit there all your life. And you'd drown in the bogs there—they're so big and deep."

"Just as I thought," Metelitsa said to himself. "Know what?" he said, getting up. "You look after my horse for a bit and I'll go on foot into the village. I see it's easier here to lose all you've got than to buy anything."

"Why are you in such a hurry? Stay a bit!" the shepherd boy said in a disappointed voice, also getting up. "It's so dull here when you're alone," he explained plaintively, gazing at Metelitsa with big, pleading, moist eyes.

"Can't be done, brother." Metelitsa made a gesture of regret. "It's the right time to poke about when it's dark. But I'll be back soon, and we'll tie up the stallion. Where do you think their chief is staying?"

The boy explained how to find the house where the squadron commander was staying and said it would be a good idea to get there across the back gardens.

"Have you got a lot of dogs there?"

"There's plenty, but they're not fierce."

Metelitsa tethered the horse, said good-bye, and went along a path by the river. The boy followed him with sad eyes until he was lost in the darkness.

In half an hour Metelitsa found himself close by the village. The path turned to the right, but, following the shepherd boy's advice, he went straight over a recently mown field until he came up against the fence enclosing the peasants' gardens. He then made his way across them. The village was asleep; there were no lights anywhere now; by the light of the stars the warmly thatched roofs of the small huts

were barely visible in the quiet, empty orchards; over the gardens rose the smell of damp, freshly turned soil.

Metelitsa passed two lanes and turned into the third. The dogs greeted him with uncertain, hoarse barks, as though they themselves were afraid; but nobody came out into the street to accost him. He could see that the village was accustomed to everything, including the presence of mysterious strangers wandering about the streets and doing whatever they liked. He did not even come across any whispering couples of lovers—a sight one would expect to see at this time of the year, the season of marriages; in the dense shadows thrown by the garden wattle fences nobody whispered of love this autumn.

Following the directions which the boy shepherd had given him, he passed a few more lanes, skirting the village church, and at last reached the painted fence of the priest's garden. It was in the priest's house that the squadron commander was staying. Metelitsa looked about and listened; finding nothing suspicious, he swung noiselessly over the fence.

The orchard was dense with trees and bushes, although the leaves had already fallen. Trying to restrain the heavy pounding of his heart, almost ceasing to breathe, Metelitsa made his way deeper into the orchard. The bushes came to an end where two paths crossed, and at about forty yards to his left he saw a lighted window. It was open. There were people sitting inside. A mellow, even light streamed over the fallen leaves, and the bare branches and trunks of the apple-trees were bathed in a strange, golden light.

"Here it is!" Metelitsa thought, one cheek twitching nervously; and he grew hot all over with that awe-inspiring, irresistible feeling of fearless desperation which always drove him on towards the wildest exploits. Although he still wondered whether anyone would benefit by his eavesdropping on these people in the lighted room, he already knew that he would not leave the spot until he had done so. In a few minutes he was standing behind an apple-tree close

to the window, listening intently and trying to remember everything that was being said.

There were four of them, and they were playing cards at a table placed deep in the room. To the right of Metelitsa sat a little old priest with smoothly oiled thin hair and ferrety eyes; his tiny hands flew expertly over the table, shuffling the cards noiselessly with doll-like fingers; his eyes seemed to peer under each card as he dealt it, so that his neighbour, who sat with his back to Metelitsa, cast a rapid, nervous glance at each card he received and hid it at once under the table. Facing Metelitsa sat a handsome officer, stout, languid, evidently good-natured, a pipe stuck between his teeth. It was probably because of the man's stoutness that Metelitsa put him down as the squadron commander. However, during all the time that followed, he was chiefly interested, for some reason unknown to himself, in the fourth player—a man with a pale, bloated face and unmoving eyelashes, who wore a black Cossack hat and a *burka*, which he wrapped more closely round himself after playing a card.

Far from what Metelitsa had expected to hear, they spoke of commonplace and uninteresting things; the greater part of their talk was devoted to the game.

"I play eighty," said the man with his back to Metelitsa.

"You're too cautious, sir, too cautious," rejoined the man in the black Cossack cap. "A hundred blind," he added carelessly.

The stout, handsome man, narrowing his eyes, examined his cards and, removing the pipe from his mouth, raised the call to a hundred and five.

"I pass," said the first, turning to the priest, who was holding the stock.

"I knew you would," said the black cap mockingly.

"Am I to blame if I don't get good cards?" the first said in self-extenuation, turning to the priest for sympathy.

"Easy does it," the priest joked, puckering his face and giggling in a mean way, as if he wanted to emphasize the

utter unimportance of his neighbour's game. "You're two hundred and two points down already. You're a sly one!" And he wagged his finger with simulated merriment and understanding.

"What a louse!" Metelitsa thought.

"Ah, so you pass, too?" the priest asked the languid officer. "Please take the stock, sir," he said to the black cap. Not revealing the cards, he pushed the stock over.

For a minute or two they slammed their cards hard down on the table, until the black cap lost.

"Serves the bloody swanker right, too!" Metelitsa thought contemptuously, not knowing whether to go away or to remain a little longer. But he could not leave just then—the loser had turned towards the window, and Metelitsa felt his piercing glance go straight through him, terrible in its unblinking accuracy.

Meanwhile the man with his back to the window began to shuffle the cards. His movements were as deliberate and economical as those of an elderly woman making the sign of the cross.

"Nechitailo is still away," the languid officer said, yawning. "I expect he's been successful with her. I wish I'd gone with him."

"Two of you?" asked the black cap, turning away from the window. "She can stand it," he added with a crooked grin.

"You mean Vasenka?" the priest asked. "Oh, yes, she can stand it. Why, we used to have a beefy psalm-reader here . . . ah, yes, I've told you about it already. Only Sergei Ivanovich would never have taken you along. Never. Do you know what he told me in private yesterday? 'I'm going to take her away with me,' he said. 'I won't be afraid to marry her,' he said. Oh! . . ." the priest cried suddenly, clapping his hand to his mouth, his little eyes shining slyly. "What a memory I have! I didn't mean to, and now I've let it out. Well, don't give me away." He shook his hands before his face in simulated horror; and though all of them, like Metelitsa, felt his hypocrisy and the hidden servility of

his every word and gesture, nobody commented on it, and they all laughed.

Metelitsa, crouching and moving sideways, edged away from the window. Just as he reached the spot where the paths crossed he came face to face with a man in a Cossack greatcoat flung over one shoulder. Behind him were two other men.

"What are you doing here?" the man asked in surprise, instinctively clutching his greatcoat, which nearly slipped from him when he bumped into Metelitsa.

The platoon commander leaped aside and dashed into the bushes.

"Stop! Hold him! Get him! Here, men! Hey! ..." several voices shouted. Sharp shots rang out.

Metelitsa lost his cap and almost got tangled up in the bushes. He fled at random, but the voices yelled and menaced him from ahead, too, and he could hear the frenzied barking of the dogs on the road.

"Here he is—hold him!" someone shouted, springing towards Metelitsa with outstretched arm. A bullet screamed past his ear. Metelitsa fired back. The man who had attacked him stumbled and fell.

"You won't get me!" Metelitsa vowed, unable to believe until the last moment that they would get him.

But someone huge and heavy fell upon him from behind and pinned him to the ground. Metelitsa tried to wrench free his arm, but a savage blow on the head stunned him.

They beat him, taking turns, and even as he lay unconscious he felt their blows raining down on him.

In the valley where the company slept it was damp and dark, but behind the orange-tinted forest glade across the Khaunikhedza the sun rose, and the day, filled with the odours of autumnal putrefaction, broke over the taiga.

The camp guard, who had dozed off by the horses, heard in his sleep an insistent, rhythmic beat, resembling distant

machine-gun fire, and he sprang up in fear, snatching up his rifle. But it was only a woodpecker, hammering on an ancient alder-tree by the river. The guard swore; shivering with cold, he drew his threadbare greatcoat about him and went out into the glade. No one else had wakened—the partisans had lost themselves in the deep, dreamless, and hopeless sleep of men who are hungry and exhausted and who expect nothing from the new day.

"The platoon commander's not back yet . . . must have gobbled up plenty of food and gone to sleep in a hut, while we're sitting hungry here!" the camp guard thought. He admired Metelitsa and was proud of him just as the other fellows, but now he felt sure that Metelitsa was a rather rascally fellow and that they had been mistaken in making him a platoon commander. The guard at once began to hate the idea of suffering in the taiga while others, people like Metelitsa, enjoyed all the pleasures of the earth. Not daring to disturb Levinson without sufficient cause, he woke Baklanov instead.

"What? Not back yet?" Baklanov asked, sitting up and staring blankly with his sleepy eyes. "Not back, you say?" he shouted suddenly. He was not fully awake yet, but he already sensed trouble. "No, it can't be, brother, you're fooling. Oh, yes! Well, wake Levinson!" He jumped up, tightening his belt with a swift movement, drew his sleepy eyebrows together, and at once grew hard and self-controlled.

Levinson, though he was fast asleep, heard his name mentioned and immediately opened his eyes and sat up. A glance at the guard and at Baklanov told him that Metelitsa had not returned and that it was high time to move on. For a moment he felt so tired and broken that he wanted to bury his head in his greatcoat again and go on sleeping, to forget Metelitsa and all his own cares. But the next moment he raised himself on his knees and, rolling up his greatcoat, began to answer Baklanov's excited questioning in dry and indifferent tones:

"Well, what of it? I thought as much. We'll meet him on the road, of course."

"And if we don't meet him?"

"If we don't? Say, have you got a spare cord for my pack?"

"Get up, get up, you sleepy swine! We're going on to the village!" the guard shouted, kicking the sleeping men. The ruffled heads of the partisans rose above the grass, and the first half-hearted curses flew after the guard. In better times Dubov used to call them their "good mornings."

"The fellows are getting pretty fierce," Baklanov said thoughtfully. "They're hungry."

"Aren't you?" Levinson asked.

"Me? I don't count." Baklanov frowned. "You know I can take anything you can."

"I know that," Levinson said, with such a soft and gentle look that it made Baklanov stare at him as if he had never seen the man before.

"You've got thin, you know," he said with unexpected compassion. "Your beard is all that's left of you. If I was in your place——"

"You'd go and wash, eh? Come on," Levinson cut him short, with a guilty and tight-lipped smile.

They went to the river. Baklanov took off his blouse and his shirt and began to splash about; it was evident that he was not afraid of cold water. His body was strong, firm, tanned, as though cast in metal, but his head was childishly round, and he washed it with rather awkward and childish movements, pouring the water on it with one cupped hand and rubbing it with his palm.

"I talked a lot about something last night, and I promised something, but today it all seems unnecessary," Levinson thought abruptly. Vague, disagreeable recollections of the previous night's talk with Metchik and his own thoughts it had provoked, came into his mind. Not that his words now seemed to him false in the sense that they did not express what he really felt; he knew that they were just, intelligent, meaningful; but for all that he was filled with a queer dis-

satisfaction as he remembered them. "Ah, yes, I promised him another horse. Was there anything wrong in that? No, I'd do the same today—everything's all right here. Then what's wrong? The trouble is——"

"Why don't you wash?" asked Baklanov, who had finished splashing about and was now rubbing himself with a dirty towel until the skin was red. "The water's cold. It's nice!"

"——the trouble is that I'm ill, and every day it's harder and harder for me to control myself," Levinson thought, stepping down to the water.

However, when he had washed, belted himself, and felt on his hip the familiar weight of his Mauser, he realized that his sleep that night had refreshed him.

"What's happened to Metelitsa?" This thought possessed him wholly.

Levinson could not picture a motionless Metelitsa, still less a dead Metelitsa. He had always felt vaguely attracted to him; more than once he had noticed that it gave him pleasure simply to ride beside him, talk to him, or merely look at him. He admired Metelitsa not for any outstanding socially useful qualities—in which, indeed, he was rather lacking, and which Levinson himself possessed to a much greater degree—but for his uncommon physical tenacity, his sheer animal vitality, which bubbled in him like an inexhaustible stream, and in which Levinson himself was somewhat deficient. Whenever he saw his lithe, agile figure, always prepared for action, or even when he merely knew that Metelitsa was somewhere about, in spite of himself he forgot his physical weakness, and it seemed to him that he could be just as tough and tireless as Metelitsa. He was even secretly proud of having such a man under his command.

The thought that Metelitsa could have fallen into the hands of the enemy though Levinson was becoming more and more convinced of it—seemed incredible to the others. Each exhausted partisan drove it from him, obstinate and

terrified; if it were true, it augured nothing but misfortune and suffering; it was therefore plainly untrue. On the other hand, the guard's supposition that the platoon commander "must have gobbled up plenty of food and gone to sleep in a hut," although such behaviour was totally unlike the alert and conscientious Metelitsa, gradually won more and more supporters. Many of them openly complained of his cowardice and "treachery," and repeatedly urged Levinson to hurry after him without further delay. And when Levinson, having devoted a more scrupulous attention than usual to matters of routine—having, among other things, given Metchik a new horse—at last gave the order to set out, the whole company were as overjoyed as if this order had there and then put an end to all their trials and misfortunes.

They rode for an hour, then another, and still the platoon commander, with the rakish lock of black hair on his forehead, did not appear on the path. They went on for another two hours, and still no Metelitsa. And now not only Levinson, but even those men who had been most eager to envy and curse Metelitsa, began to doubt whether his mission had ended happily.

The company rode on towards the edge of the taiga in brooding silence.





XV. THREE DEATHS

Metelitsa came to his senses in a large dark barn; he was lying on the ground, and his first sensation was the chilling dampness of the earth penetrating his body. He at once remembered everything that had happened to him. The blows which had rained on him still resounded in his head; he could feel clots of blood on his forehead and his cheeks.

The first more or less clear thought that entered his head was that of escape. Metelitsa could not bring himself to believe that after all he had gone through in his life, after all his exploits and the luck that had attended his deeds, glorifying his name among men, he could eventually lie and rot in the earth like all men. He groped everywhere about the barn, examined every little crevice, even tried to break

open the door, but met with no success. Cold, dead wood surrounded him on every side; the cracks were so hopelessly small that he could not even see through them; they barely let through the dim light of the autumn dawn.

However, he groped on and on until he eventually realized with final, desperate certitude that this time there was no chance of escape. And once he was convinced of this, the question of his own life and death ceased to interest him. All his mental and physical powers were now concentrated on one thing only, infinitely unimportant from the point of view of his own life and death, but of paramount importance in his eyes: by what means could he, Metelitsa, whose courage and daring until now had been unquestioned, show the men who were going to kill him that he did not fear them, that he felt nothing but contempt for them.

He had not yet had time to consider this question when he heard noises outside; the bolt grated, and with the grey morning light, feeble and wavering, there entered two armed Cossacks in wide pants with yellow stripes. Metelitsa, standing with legs apart, looked at them with narrowed eyes.

When they saw him they fidgeted uneasily by the door. The one behind sniffed nervously.

"Come along, countryman," the one in front said at last, with no hatred in his voice, but almost as if he felt rather guilty.

Metelitsa lowered his head, glowering, and went out.

Soon he was standing in front of a man he had seen the night before in the room into which he had looked from the priest's garden—the one who wore a black Cossack cap and felt *burka*. There was also the stout, handsome, good-natured officer who Metelitsa had supposed was the squadron commander, and who now sat upright in an arm-chair and looked at Metelitsa in perplexion, with no trace of severity. Now, after he had a long look at each of them, he realized by some imperceptible signs that the chief was not the good-natured officer, but the man in the Cossack *burka*.

"You can go," the latter said sharply, looking at the Cossacks standing by the door.

Clumsily elbowing each other, they stamped out of the room.

"What were you doing yesterday in the orchard?" he asked rapidly, stepping in front of Metelitsa and fixing him with his unwavering eyes.

Metelitsa stared back, scornfully, without replying. His eyes did not drop; his black satiny eyebrows moved slightly, and his whole attitude conveyed his determination, no matter what questions they might put to him, and no matter in what way they might try to force an answer from him, to say nothing that would satisfy his questioners.

"Stop that nonsense!" the chief said, not in the least annoyed and not raising his voice. But his tone made it clear that he understood everything that was going on at the moment inside Metelitsa.

"What's the use of my saying anything?" the platoon commander said, smiling condescendingly.

The squadron commander studied the petrified, pock marked face, smeared with dry blood.

"Was it a long time ago you had smallpox?" he asked abruptly.

"What?" the platoon commander asked, taken aback. He was taken aback because there was neither mockery nor any hidden meaning in the officer's question; it was clear that the man was simply curious about his pock-marked face. When Metelitsa realized this, however, it made him more furious than if the question had been asked in mockery. With that question the squadron commander seemed to probe the possibility of establishing some semblance of human relations with him.

"Well, what are you - a native, or do you come from some other place?"

"Never mind that, *sir!*" Metelitsa snarled in a fury, clenching his fists, reddening, and scarcely able to control the impulse to hurl himself on the officer. He wanted to add

something else, but he was gripped now by one idea: why ought he not, after all, seize this man in black, with his repulsively calm, bloated face, covered with hideous, reddish bristles, and strangle him? So obsessed was he by this idea that he stopped short and took a step forward; his hands jerked and his pock-marked face broke out into a sweat.

"Oho!" exclaimed the man in a loud, astonished voice. But he did not move away, and his eyes did not leave Metelitsa for an instant.

Metelitsa paused, irresolute, his eyes flashing. Then the man pulled his revolver from its holster and waved it in front of Metelitsa's nose. The platoon commander regained control of himself and, turning to the window, stood still in arrogant silence. After that, no matter how much they threatened him with the revolver, warning him of the most terrible punishments, no matter how much they pleaded with him to tell what he knew, promising him his freedom, he did not utter a word, did not even look at his questioners.

In the midst of the interrogation the door opened quietly, and a hairy face with large, frightened, and foolish eyes looked into the room.

"Ah!" said the squadron commander. "Have you assembled them all? All right, tell the men to come and take this gallant fellow."

The same two Cossacks conducted Metelitsa into the yard, pointing to the open gate and following him. Metelitsa did not look back, but he felt that the two officers walked behind. They reached the church square. There, by the churchwarden's hut, the people of the village were crowded together, surrounded on all sides by a cordon of mounted Cossacks.

It had always seemed to Metelitsa that he did not like people, that he despised them for their dull and petty ways—them and everything about them. He had believed himself to be entirely indifferent to what people thought of him and what they said of him; he had never had friends and had never sought them. Nonetheless, everything big and im-

portant he had done in life, although he himself was not aware of it, he had done because of his people and for his people, so that they might look at him with pride and admiration, and sing his praise. And now, when he raised his head, he embraced—not only with his eyes, but with his whole heart—this moving, motley, silent crowd of villagers: men, boys, frightened women in their home-made coarse-cloth skirts, girls in white or coloured kerchiefs; the restless men on horseback, with locks of hair escaping from under their caps, dressed in gaudy colours, as spick and span as the Cossacks pictured in cheap coloured prints; their long shadows dancing on the grass; and even the ancient church cupolas above them, in the lukewarm sun, etched sharply against the cold sky.

“Isn’t it wonderful!” he almost cried aloud, his heart suddenly going out to it all, rejoicing in everything his eyes perceived—the bright, living, poverty-stricken mass, all that breathed and glittered around and stirred within him. And he strode forward more easily and freely, with the quick, light gait of a lithe animal, almost as if he were gliding over the earth; and everyone in the square looked at him and held his breath and felt that the animal strength which dwelt in that ardent supple body was as light and springy as his step.

He walked through the crowd, looking above it, but conscious of its silent, concentrated attention, and stopped at the porch of the churchwarden’s hut. The officers, overtaking him, went up the steps.

“Over here!” the squadron commander said, indicating a place by his side.

Metelitsa took the steps in one stride and stood beside him.

Now he could be clearly seen by everybody in the crowd—an erect, taut figure, black-haired, wearing soft deerskin boots and an unbuttoned shirt, held tight by a girdle with thick green tassels. His sharp eagle eyes shone with a far-away gleam, fixed on the mountains which stood majestically in the grey morning mist.



"Who knows this man?" the commander asked, sweeping the crowd with a piercing look, which seemed to dwell for an instant on every face.

Everybody on whom his glance fell fidgeted and blinked and lowered his head; only the women, who had not the strength to turn their eyes away, looked at him dumbly and stupidly, with a cowardly and avid curiosity.

"Does *nobody* know him?" the commander asked, ironically emphasizing the word "nobody," as though he was certain that everybody *knew* Metelitsa. "We'll make sure of that now. Nechitailo!" he shouted, beckoning to a tall officer in a long Cossack greatcoat, mounted on a prancing chestnut horse.

The crowd suddenly grew excited; there was the sound of muffled voices, and those in front jerked their heads about. A man in a black waistcoat pushed vigorously through the crowd, his head lowered so that only his thick fur cap could be seen.

"Make way, make way!" he repeated quickly, clearing the way with one hand and leading somebody else with the other.

At last he reached the porch, and then everybody saw that he was leading a thin, black-haired boy in a long jacket, terrified and resisting, his dark eyes skipping from Metelitsa to the squadron commander. The hubbub grew noisier; one could hear sighs and the suppressed whispering of the women. Metelitsa looked down and suddenly recognized in the black-haired boy with terrified eyes and thin, ridiculous, childish neck the shepherd to whom he had entrusted his horse the night before.

The peasant who held him by the hand doffed his cap, revealing a flattish fair head with grey patches (it looked as if his hair had been unevenly sprinkled with salt), and, bowing to the commander, sputtered out, "I've got a young shepherd here...." But, obviously afraid that they might not hear him out, he bent down quickly to the boy and, pointing to Metelitsa, asked, "That's him, eh?"

For a few moments the shepherd boy and Metelitsa stared straight into each other's eyes—Metelitsa with affected indifference, the boy with fear, sympathy, and pity. Then the boy's eyes turned to the squadron commander and rested on him for the fraction of a second as if glued to the Cossack officer's face; then his eyes passed on to the peasant, who was holding him by the hand and leaning expectantly towards him. He drew a deep sigh and heavily shook his head to show that he could not identify the man. The crowd, which had grown so quiet that everybody could hear a calf move in the churchwarden's barn, stirred and became still again.

"Don't be afraid, stupid, don't be afraid!" the peasant coaxed him in a shaking voice, himself frightened and fidgeting nervously, pointing a finger at Metelitsa. "Who else can it be but him? Say it's him, don't be afraid . . . ah, you viper!" He stopped short angrily and savagely jerked the boy's arm. "It's him all right, Your Honour! Who else could it be?" he said loudly, as if justifying himself, squeezing his cap in his hand obsequiously. "Only he's afraid to say so. Who else could it be when the horse was saddled and there's a holster in the saddle-pack? Last night he rode up to the fire. 'Let my horse graze here,' he says. And he goes off to the village, and the boy waits until it is light, but he never comes back . . . so he brought in the horse, and it was saddled, and there's a holster in the pack--so who else could it be? . . ."

"Who rode up? Whose holster?" the commander asked, vainly trying to understand the man. The peasant, growing still more confused, fiddled with his cap and again began to explain, as incoherently and inconsistently as before, how his shepherd had brought home in the morning a strange horse, saddled and with a holster in the pack.

"Oh, I see!" the squadron commander said slowly. "But he doesn't admit it," he added, indicating the boy with a nod. "All right, bring him over here. We'll make him talk in our own way."

The boy, pushed from behind, drew near the porch, but did not dare to ascend. The officer ran down the steps, seized him by his thin, trembling shoulders and, pulling him up close, stared with terrible, piercing eyes into the eyes of the boy, which were round with fear.

"A-a-ah!" the boy screamed suddenly, his eyes rolling upwards.

"What are they doing to him?" one of the women wailed, giving way to her pent-up emotions.

At this moment a man's body, supple and lithe, hurtled down the steps. The crowd swayed back, raising its many hands. The squadron commander fell, knocked flat by a violent blow.

"Shoot him! Don't stand there like that!" the handsome officer cried, stretching out an arm helplessly, thrown suddenly into a foolish panic, forgetting that he, too, could shoot.

Several mounted men dashed into the crowd, the horses scattering the people. Metelitsa, pressing the whole weight of his body against his enemy, tried to seize him by the throat, but the other wriggled like a bat under him, his black *burka* spread out wing-like, and convulsively clutched at his belt, trying to pull out his revolver. Finally he managed to open the holster and, almost at the moment Metelitsa's fingers closed round his throat, fired several shots at him.

When the Cossacks ran up and dragged Metelitsa away by the legs, he was still clutching the grass, grinding his teeth and trying to lift his head, but it fell helplessly, trailing along the ground.

"Nechitailo!" the handsome officer shouted. "Turn out the squadron! Are you coming, too, sir?" he asked the commander respectfully, avoiding, however, to look at him.

"Yes."

"The commander's horse!"

Half an hour later the Cossack squadron rode out from the village and galloped along the road which Metelitsa had taken the previous night.

Baklanov, no less troubled and anxious than the others, could restrain himself no longer.

"Listen, let me ride ahead," he said to Levinson. "The devil knows what we're up against!"

He spurred on his horse and soon—much sooner than he had expected—rode out to the edge of the taiga, where the tumble-down shed stood. He had no need to climb on to the roof: not more than half a verst away about fifty mounted men were descending a hill. He saw that they were regulars: their uniforms were all alike, with yellow cap-bands and stripes on their trousers. Fighting the impulse to turn back at once and give warning of the danger (Levinson might ride out at any moment), Baklanov hid in the bushes, anxious to discover whether or not there were more troops coming from behind the hill. But none appeared. The squadron rode at a walk, though in rather disorderly ranks. Judging by the men's loose carriage and by the nodding heads of the horses, they had evidently just been galloping hard.

Baklanov turned back and rode into Levinson, who was just emerging from the forest. He signalled to him to stop.

"Many of them?" Levinson asked, after he had heard him out.

"About fifty."

"Infantry?"

"No, all mounted."

"Kubrak, Dubov—dismount!" Levinson ordered quietly. "Kubrak—take the right flank. Dubov the left. I'll show you!" he hissed suddenly, observing that one of the partisans, a man with a bandaged face, had begun to slip away from the ranks and several others were about to follow him. "Get back to your place!" and he threatened the man with his whip.

He put Baklanov in charge of Metelitsa's platoon and ordered him to remain where he was. Then he dismounted and limped briskly in front of the line, swinging his Mauser.

He ordered the men to make a skirmish line in the bushes,

and crawled towards the shed, accompanied by one partisan. The squadron was quite near. By their yellow cap-bands and trouser-stripes Levinson knew that they were Cossacks. He could see the commander in a black *burka*.

"Tell them to crawl over here," he whispered to the partisan. "Don't let them get up though, otherwise.... Well, what are you waiting for? Look sharp!" And he pushed the man, frowning.

Though the Cossacks were few in number, Levinson was suddenly seized with excitement, as in the first, early period of his fighting career.

In this career he distinguished between two periods, which were not divided by any definite line, but were distinguishable for the sensations they had aroused in him.

During the first period, when, lacking military training, not even knowing how to shoot a gun, he had nevertheless been obliged to take over the command of a mass of men, he felt that he did not really command, but that events developed independently of him and of his volition. Not that he had in any way neglected his duties—no, he had tried to do all he could. And not that he believed, either then or now, that an individual was incapable of influencing events in which masses of men were involved—no, this view seemed to him the worst sort of human hypocrisy, a camouflage for the weakness of those who had recourse to it, for their lack of the will to action; but because, in this first short period of his military career, almost all his strength of mind had been devoted to overcoming and hiding from others the fear for his own life which he could not help feeling in battle.

However, he had adapted himself to the circumstances fairly quickly; he achieved a state of mind in which fear for his own life was no longer an obstacle to disposing of the lives of others. And in this second period he acquired the power to direct events; the more clearly and accurately he divined their genuine course and the mutual relation of forces and of the men involved—the more complete and successful was this power of his.

But now Levinson again felt the old excitement. He attributed it to his state of mind, to his thoughts about himself and about the disappearance of Metelitsa.

While the line crept up through the bushes, he nevertheless managed to regain control of himself, and once again his slight, tense figure with its assured, precise movements seemed to his men the embodiment of an unfailing plan, in which they believed by force of habit and out of inner necessity.

The squadron was already so near that the sound of the horses' hoofs and the low talk of the horsemen could be heard; even their faces could now be plainly seen. Levinson could discern their expressions, particularly that of a stout, handsome officer who, sitting rather clumsily in the saddle, a pipe stuck between his teeth, had just ridden out in front.

"What a brute that fellow must be," Levinson thought, his glance lingering on him; Levinson involuntarily attributed to the handsome officer all those rascally qualities which are habitually ascribed to an enemy. "How my heart is beating! Is it time to fire? Is it time? No, wait till they get to that birch-tree with the torn bark. Why does he sit like a sack in the saddle? Plat-oo-oon!" he cried in a thin, drawn-out voice just as the squadron reached the birch with the torn bark. "Fire!"

At the sound of his voice the handsome officer raised his head in astonishment, but the next moment his cap flew off his head, and his face assumed an expression of indescribable terror and helplessness.

"Fire!" Levinson shouted again, and he fired a shot himself, aiming at the handsome officer.

The squadron was thrown into confusion; many of the Cossacks fell from their horses; but the handsome officer remained in the saddle; his horse reared with its teeth bared. For a few seconds the panic-stricken men and rearing horses bunched together, the men shouting words which could not be heard in the firing. Then a horseman in a black cap and a black *burka* sprang out from the chaos and pranced in front

of the squadron, restraining his horse with a hard hand and brandishing his sabre. The others seemed to ignore his orders; some of them, indeed, were already galloping away, lashing their horses; and in another moment the partisans rushed after them. They jumped up from the ground; the hot-heads raced away in pursuit, firing as they ran.

"To your horses!" Levinson shouted. "Baklanov—here! Mount!"

Baklanov, his face distorted in a fierce grimace, flew by, his entire body stretched forward, one hand hanging low with the sabre, which glittered like mica. Behind him came Mctelitsa's platoon, with yells and the clash of steel, bristling with weapons.

Soon the whole company was galloping after them.

Metchik, carried along by the charge, rode in the centre of this avalanche. Not only did he feel no fear whatsoever, he had even lost the habitual trick of observing his own thoughts and actions and analyzing them from a detached standpoint; he saw only somebody's familiar back and mop of hair in front of him, felt that Nivka was not falling behind, and knew that the enemy was running away; and, like all the rest, he had no other thought than to catch up with the Cossacks and not to fall behind the familiar back.

The Cossack squadron had disappeared in a birch grove. A little later they began to fire rapidly, but the company galloped on without slowing down, their excitement mounting because of the firing.

Suddenly the shaggy colt which was racing along in front of Metchik stumbled and struck the ground with its nose, and the familiar back flew over its head with outstretched hands. Like the rest, Metchik swerved past something big and black which writhed on the ground.

No longer seeing the familiar back, Metchik fixed his eyes on the wood rushing towards him. A small bearded figure on a black horse flashed past him, shouting something and pointing with a sabre. Several horsemen by his side veered abruptly to the left, but Metchik, not understanding why

they did so, galloped straight ahead until he flew into the wood and almost bashed himself against the tree-trunks, scratching his face on the bare branches. He was only just able to rein in Nivka, who was tearing madly through the bushes. He was alone in the soft stillness of the birch wood, among the golden leaves and grasses.

The next moment the wood seemed to be swarming with Cossacks. He screamed and, losing his head, dashed back, ignoring the sharp, prickly branches which whipped his face.

When he rode out into the field the company was gone. About two hundred paces away lay a dead horse, its saddle on its side. Near the horse, quite motionless, clasping his knees to his chest, a man sat on the ground. It was Morozka.

Metchik, ashamed of his recent terror, rode up to him at a walk.

Mishka was lying on his side, his teeth bared, his large eyes glassy and staring, his forelegs with their sharp hoofs bent in the knees, as if even in death he was ready to gallop. Morozka looked past him despairingly, his unseeing eyes dry and glittering.

"Morozka!" Metchik called softly, stopping in front of him. He was suddenly filled with a kind, tearful pity for the man and the dead horse.

Morozka did not move. For a few minutes neither of them said a word, neither of them moved. Then Morozka sighed, slowly unclasped his hands, got to his knees and began to unfasten the saddle, without a look at Metchik. Not daring to speak to him again, Metchik watched him in silence.

Morozka loosened the straps—one of them was torn. He examined the torn piece of leather attentively; it was stained with blood; he fingered it and threw it away. Then, groaning, he slung the saddle on his back and went off, bent and bow-legged, towards the wood.

"Let me take it. Or, if you like, you can take my horse. I'll go on foot," Metchik cried after him.

Morozka did not look back; he bent still lower under the weight of the saddle.



Metchik, anxious for some reason to avoid him, made a wide detour to the left, and when he had passed the wood, he saw at a short distance from him a village sprawling across the valley. In a wide hollow to his right, extending as far as the mountain range, which ran aside and was lost in the opaque-grey distances, he caught sight of a forest. The sky, which had been so clear early that morning, now hung low and cheerless; the sun was barely visible.

Fifty paces away lay the bodies of several Cossacks who had been cut down by the sabres of the partisans. One was still alive; time and again, with great difficulty, he raised himself on his hands and again collapsed and groaned. Metchik passed by at a considerable distance, trying to shut his ears to the man's groans. Several mounted partisans were coming towards him from the village.

"They've killed Morozka's horse," Metchik said when they drew up near him.

Nobody answered him. One of the men threw a suspicious glance at Metchik as though he wanted to ask, "And where were you when we were fighting here?" His face haggard, Metchik rode on, filled with evil presentiments.

When he entered the village a good many of the partisans had already been billeted; the others stood in a crowd near a big hut with tall, carved window-frames. Levinson, his cap askew, covered with sweat and dust, stood on the porch issuing orders. Metchik dismounted near the fence, where the horses were standing.

"Where have you sprung from?" his section commander asked him ironically. "Have you been gathering mushrooms, or what?"

"No, I just lost you fellows," Metchik replied. He did not care what they thought of him, but he tried to justify himself from force of habit. "I got into the wood, and you, I think, had turned off to the left."

"That's right, to the left," sang out a fair-haired young partisan with ingenuous dimples and a tuft of hair like a cock's crest on his head. "I called to you, but you didn't

hear, I suppose." And he looked raptly at Metchik, plainly recalling with pleasure all the details of the chase. Metchik, having tied up his horse, sat down beside him.

Kubrak came out of a lane followed by a crowd of peasants, who were leading two men towards the hut, their hands tied behind their backs. One of them wore a black waistcoat and had a misshapen, flat head which looked as though it had been sprinkled unevenly with salt; he was shivering and pleading with the men around him. The other was a skinny priest in a torn cassock, through which his crumpled pants and hanging fly could be seen. Metchik noticed that a silver chain, obviously from a cross, dangled from Kubrak's belt.

"Is this the man?" Levinson asked, turning pale, pointing to the man in the waistcoat, when the two were dragged to the porch.

"That's him, that's him!" the peasants boomed in one voice.

"And such a wretch, too," said Levinson, turning to Stashinsky, who sat at his side on the banisters. "But Metelitsa can't be brought back to life." He blinked his eyes rapidly and turned away; he was silent for a few moments, trying hard not to think about Metelitsa.

"Comrades! Dear Comrades!..." the prisoner whimpered, looking now at the peasants, now at Levinson, with dog-like, servile eyes. "Do you think I did it of my own free will? Oh, my God! Dear Comrades!"

Nobody listened to him. The peasants turned away from him.

"What else is there to say? The whole village saw you try to make the boy talk," one of them said sternly, eyeing him coldly.

"You've got nobody but yourself to blame," another chimed in and self-consciously dropped his head.

"Shoot him," Levinson said coldly. "Only take him farther away."

"What about the priest?" Kubrak asked. "He's a bitch, too—he played host to the officers."

"Let him go—the hell with him!"

The crowd, joined by many of the partisans, poured after Kubrak, who dragged away the man in the waistcoat. The man tried to dig in his feet and wept, his lower jaw trembling.

Siskin, the cap on his head spattered with filthy dirt, but with a triumphant expression on his face, walked up to Metchik.

"Ah, there you are!" he said, his voice joyful and proud. "You're all scratched. Well, let's go and find some grub. They'll polish the fellow off now," he drawled meaningfully and whistled.

It was dirty and stuffy in the hut where they got their dinner; there was a smell of bread and shredded cabbage. The whole corner by the stove was cluttered up with dirty cabbage-heads. Siskin, gulping down bread and *shchi*, bragged endlessly of his own exploits and glanced from time to time, from under his eyebrows, at the girl who was serving them. She was slender and had long plaits; she looked shy and happy. Metchik tried to listen to Siskin, but he was constantly on the alert and shivered at the least noise.

"Suddenly he turned and aimed at me," Siskin was saying, swallowing and choking. "But I gave it to him."

At this moment the window-panes rattled, a distant volley of shots was heard. With a start Metchik dropped his spoon and his face grew white.

"Will there be no end to it all!" he cried despairingly; covering his face with his hands he rushed out of the hut.

"They've shot him, that man in the waistcoat," he thought, burying his face in the collar of his greatcoat, lying somewhere in the bushes; he did not even remember how he had got there. "They'll kill me as well sooner or later. But am I really alive? I might just as well be dead. I'll never again see the people who are dear to me . . . and my curly-headed girl whose picture I tore into bits. . . . He must have cried,

that poor man in the waistcoat.... Oh, God, why did I tear up her picture? Shall I never see her again? How unhappy I am!"

It was almost evening when he emerged from the bushes, his eyes dry, a look of suffering on his face. Somewhere—quite near—drunken voices were singing lustily; someone was playing an accordion. At the gate he met the slender girl with long-plaits. She was carrying a pair of water-buckets on a yoke, bending under their weight as gracefully as a vine branch.

"Oh, you ought to see one of your fellows making merry with our village boys," she said, raising her dark eyelashes and smiling. "Listen—do you hear?" She swayed her pretty little head in time to the boisterous music, which floated from round the corner. The buckets also swayed and the water splashed. The girl became shy and fled towards the gate.

"And that suits us jail-birds fine!..." sang a drunken voice which Metchik knew very well. He peered round the corner and saw Morozka swinging his accordion, his ruffled forelock hanging over his eyes and sticking to his red, perspiring face.

Morozka was staggering down the middle of the street, reeling in an indecent sort of way and drawing out the accordion for all he was worth, with the expression of a man who was doing something obscene and knew it and was penitent. He was followed by a crowd of men as drunk as himself, without belts or caps. On both sides of him, screaming and kicking up clouds of dust, ran barefooted boys, agile and grimacing like monkeys.

"Hah! ... my old pall! ..." Morozka shouted in drunken, hypocritical rapture when he saw Metchik. "Where you going? Where? Don't be afraid—we won't hurt you. Have a drink with us. God-damn you to hell! Anyway we'll all die together!..."

They all crowded round Metchik, embracing him, bending good-natured, drunken faces towards him, breathing the stale

smell of spirits into his face. Someone pushed a bottle and half a cucumber into his hands.

"No, no, I don't drink," Metchik said, trying to free himself. "I don't want to...."

"Drink, god-damn you to hell!" Morozka shouted, almost crying in drunken ecstasy. "—God—Jesus—the Holy Mother!... We'll all die together!..."

"Just a bit then, please. I don't drink, you see," said Metchik, surrendering.

He took several gulps from the bottle. Morozka, drawing the accordion as wide as it could go, began to sing in a hoarse voice. The others joined in.

"Come on with us," one of them said, grasping Metchik by the arm. "*Here is where I live!*" he sang out nasally, catching a line of the song, and pressed an unshaved cheek against Metchik's face.

They all went along the road, joking, stumbling, frightening the dogs, and cursing to the sky—which hung over them, a darkening, starless dome—their mothers, and this fickle and difficult world.





XVI. THE BOG

Varya, who had not taken part in the attack, but had remained in the taiga with the baggage-train, came into the village when everybody had already taken up quarters in the peasants' huts. She noticed that the huts had been occupied in a haphazard fashion; the platoons had mixed; nobody knew where anybody else had gone; nobody heeded the commanders—the whole company, in fact, had broken up into independent groups.

On the way to the village she had seen the dead body of Morozka's horse, but nobody could tell her exactly what had happened to Morozka; some said he had been killed—they had seen it with their own eyes; others said he was only wounded; there were still others who, knowing nothing

about Morozka's fate, at once began to speak about their own good fortune in having come through unscathed. All this only aggravated Varya's hopeless misery since her unsuccessful attempt to make up with Metchik.

Exhausted by the amorous advances of the men, by hunger, by tormenting thoughts, almost too weak to stay in the saddle, on the verge of tears, she at last found Dubov. He was the first person who was really pleased to see her and who greeted her with a grave and sympathetic smile.

And when she saw his grim face, which seemed much older now, and his dirty drooping black moustache, when she saw all the others around her—those dear, familiar, rough faces, which were as grey and as indelibly marked with coal-dust as Dubov's face, then her heart trembled with sweet and painful grief, with love for them and pity for herself. They reminded her of her young days when, a pretty and ingenuous girl with fluffy plaits and large, wistful eyes, she had pushed the waggons along the dark pit-tracks and danced at the evening gatherings, and when these faces, absurd and glowing with desire, had likewise surrounded her.

From the time she had quarrelled with Morozka she had somehow been torn away from them, but they remained nevertheless the only people who were near to her—these miners who had once lived and worked by her side and had courted her. "How long it is since I've seen them! I'd almost forgotten about them. Oh, my dears!..." she thought with love and remorse, and she felt such a sweet ache in her temples that she had to fight back the tears that welled up in her eyes.

Dubov alone had been able to billet his platoon in an orderly fashion in adjoining huts. His men were posted on sentry duty on the outskirts of the village and also helped Levinson to collect supplies. What had previously been hidden in the rush of events and in everyday affairs, in which everybody had played an equal role, emerged clearly that

day: it was Dubov's platoon which held the entire company together.

Varya learned from the fellows that Morozka was alive and had not even been wounded. She was shown his new horse, which had been captured from the Whites. It was a tall chestnut colt with slender legs, a close-cropped mane, and a long, thin neck, which gave it a somewhat wily, treacherous appearance. They had already christened it "Judas."

"So he's alive..." Varya thought, looking absently at the colt. "Well, I'm glad."

After dinner, when she climbed up to a hayloft and lay down in the scented hay, listening for fear that some "old friend" might be climbing up to her, she again remembered, with a soft, dreamy and warm emotion, that Morozka was alive, and fell asleep with this comforting thought.

She woke suddenly, in great anxiety, her hands numb with cold. Night, boundless and stirring in the darkness, peered in under the roof. A cold wind shook the branches, stirred the hay, and rustled the leaves in the garden.

"My God, where's Morozka? Where are all the rest?" Varya thought in terror. "Am I going to be left all alone again in this black hole?"

With feverish haste, shivering, struggling with her sleeves, she put on her greatcoat and hurriedly clambered down from the loft.

Near the gate the figure of a sentry was silhouetted against the night.

"Who's that on duty?" she asked, drawing nearer. "Kostya? Has Morozka come back?"

"So you've been sleeping up in the loft!" said Kostya, greatly disappointed. "Too bad I didn't know. Don't sit up for Morozka—he's gone on a spree. He's drinking to forget his horse. Cold, aren't you? Got a match?"

She searched her pockets and gave him the box. He struck a match, cupping the flame between large hands, and brought up the lighted match to her face.

"You don't look well, girlie," he said, smiling.

"You can have the matches." She lifted the collar of her greatcoat and went through the gate.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm going to look for him."

"Morozka? Well, well! Maybe I can take his place, eh?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Hum, that's something new!"

She did not answer. "She's one of us . . . a fine girl!" the sentry thought.

It was so dark that Varya could barely distinguish the road. It began to drizzle. The gardens rustled with a dull, anxious sound. Somewhere under a fence a frozen puppy whined pitifully. Varya groped for it and put it under her greatcoat to her breast; it shivered violently and poked its muzzle against her. Near one of the huts she came across a sentry from Kubrak's platoon. She asked him whether he knew where Morozka was making merry. The sentry directed her towards the church. She wandered through half the village without finding him; despairingly, she turned back.

She had crossed so many lanes that she had forgotten the way, and now walked at random, scarcely knowing what she hoped to find. She pressed the puppy, which was warm now, closer to her breast. Probably an hour passed before she came out on to the road which led to the huts occupied by Dubov's platoon. She walked along it, holding on to the fence with her free hand to prevent herself from slipping, and had taken only a few steps when she almost fell over Morozka.

He was lying on his stomach, with his head resting on his hands, near the fence, and moaning softly; he had just been vomiting. Varya did not so much recognize him as feel that it was Morozka; it was not the first time she had found him in this state.

"Vanya!" she called, bending down and putting the soft and kind palm of her hand on his shoulder. "Why are you lying here? Do you feel bad, eh?"

He raised his head, and she saw his face, pale, swollen, lifeless. She felt sorry for him—he seemed so weak and little. Recognizing her, he smiled a twisted smile and, carefully governing his movements, sat up, leaned against the fence, and stretched out his legs.

"Ah, it's you. My 'umble reshpects!..." he babbled in a weak voice, nevertheless groping for the tone of the care-free and nonchalant Morozka. "My reshpects to you, Comrade Morozka!..."

"Come along with me, Vanya!" She took him by the arm. "Or perhaps you don't feel strong enough? Wait a bit, I'll arrange everything in a minute, I'll wake somebody...." And she straightened herself up with decision, intending to take him into the nearest hut. She did not for a moment consider whether it was right to rouse strange people in the middle of the night, or what they might think of her when she barged into the hut with a drunken man; she never took such niceties into account.

But Morozka suddenly shook his head in fear and muttered hoarsely:

"No—no—no!... I'll show you if you wake them up! Be quiet!..." And he shook his fists about his head. It seemed to her that he had got sober from fright. "Goncharenko's billeted there, don't you know?... How can you?..."

"Well, what of him? He isn't anything to us...."

"No, you don't understand...." He grimaced painfully and clutched his head. "You don't understand... He thinks I'm a man ... so how can I.... No, you can't do it...."

"What nonsense you talk, my dear!" she said, again bending down to him. "Look—it's raining, it's wet here, we move off tomorrow—come along, my dear!"

"No, I'm done for!..." he said in a mournful, sober voice.

"What am I now, who am I, what for?... Just think, fellows!..." And he looked round pitifully with swollen, tearful eyes.

Then she put her free arm round him, leaning against him so that her eyelashes almost touched his lips, and began to whisper to him tenderly and protectively, as though to a child:

"What are you so unhappy about? What's eating you so? You're sorry about the horse, yes? But they've got another one for you—such a splendid horse, too! Don't be unhappy, dearest, don't cry! Look at this little dog I've found, look at the nice little puppy!" Turning back the collar of her coat, she showed him the sleepy, long-eared pup. She was so moved that her whole being seemed to be billing and cooing with love and tenderness.

"Oh, oh! Little doggie!" Morozka said with drunken tenderness, and he seized it by the ears. "Where'd you get him? He bites, the little son of a bitch!"

"There you are. Come along, dearest!"

She managed to get him to his feet; coaxing him and trying to keep his mind from unhappy thoughts, she led him to the house. He did not resist now, but trusted and obeyed her.

While they walked he did not once mention Metchik, and she also said never a word about him, as though no Metchik had ever come between them. Soon Morozka became sulky and silent; he was growing noticeably sober.

When they reached the house where Dubov had taken up quarters, Morozka, clutching the rungs of the ladder, tried to climb up into the hayloft, but his legs would not obey him.

"Do you want me to help you?" Varya asked.

"No, I'll do it myself, you bitch!" he answered harshly, to cover up his embarrassment.

"Well, good-bye then!"

His hands fell and he looked at her in fright.

"What do you mean—good-bye?"

"Well, I mean good-bye." Her laughter was forced and melancholy.

Suddenly he stepped towards her and put his hands awkwardly round her, pressing his cheek against hers. She felt that he wanted to kiss her; he did indeed, though he was ashamed to do it, because the fellows in the pits rarely kissed the girls; they only slept with them. In all their life together he had "kissed her only once: on the day of their wedding, when he was very drunk and the neighbours shouted, "Kiss the bride!"

"That's that; it's just like old times, as if nothing had happened," Varya thought, with sorrow and bitterness, when Morozka, satiated, at last fell asleep, his head resting against her shoulder. "Again on the old track, the same old round, always towards the same goal. But, my God, there's little joy in it!"

She turned her back to Morozka, closed her eyes and drew up her knees, but she did not sleep that night. Far behind the village, where the Khaunikhedza district high road began and the sentries were posted, three shots were fired--the signal of alarm. Varya woke Morozka. As he raised his shaggy head the sentries' shots rang out again from behind the village; and immediately, piercing the silence and darkness of the night, a machine-gun howled wolfishly in return.

Morozka shook his head in annoyance and climbed down the ladder after Varya. It had stopped raining, but the wind had become stronger; a shutter was banging somewhere and wet yellow leaves whirled in the darkness. Lights appeared in the darkness. Dubov's sentry ran shouting along the street, knocking at the windows.

During the several minutes it took Morozka to reach the barn and lead out his Judas, he again lived through all the events of the previous day. His heart contracted when he again saw the dead, glassy-eyed Mishka, and suddenly he remembered with disgust and loathing his revolting behaviour on the previous night; he had staggered drunkenly

along the streets, and everybody had seen him—a drunken partisan—and had heard him yell bawdy songs from one end of the village to the other. Metchik, his enemy, had been with him; they had gone carousing together, like old pals, and he, Morozka, had vowed that he loved Metchik and had begged his forgiveness. Why? For what?... Now he saw the utter falsity of his behaviour. What will Levinson say? And could he really bring himself to face Goncharenko after the row he had kicked up?

Most of his comrades were saddling their horses and some were already leading them out of the gates, but everything went wrong with him; there was no saddle-strap and he had left his rifle in Goncharenko's hut.

"Timofei, friend, help me out!" he pleaded in pitiful, tearful tones when he saw Dubov, who was running across the yard. "Give me a spare strap—I know you've got one."

"What?!" Dubov roared. "What have you been thinking about all this time?" He cursed violently and, pushing the horses so brutally that the beasts reared, he dashed to his own horse to get the strap. "Here you are!" he said in a fury, a moment later, returning to Morozka, and suddenly he brought the strap down with all his strength on Morozka's back.

"Of course, he can beat me now—I deserve it," Morozka thought, and did not say a word in protest; he did not even feel the pain. But the whole world became even darker for him. And the shots which rang out in the darkness, the darkness itself, the fate which awaited him on the outskirts of the village—all this seemed to him a just punishment for the evil he had done in his life.

While the platoon was assembling, the firing spread into a semi-circle which extended as far as the river; blazing bombs burned snakily in the air, exploding in the village.

Baklanov, his greatcoat tightly belted, grasping his revolver, ran to the gate and shouted, "Dismount! Line up in single file! Leave twenty men with the horses!" he said to

Dubov, "Follow me! At a run!" he shouted a few minutes later and plunged into the darkness. After him, hooking their greatcoats, unfastening their ammunition pouches, ran the file of men.

On the road they met the fleeing sentries.

"There's a whole army of them!" they panted, waving their arms in panic.

Field-guns thundered; the shells burst in the middle of the village, illuminating for a brief moment part of the sky, the toppling cupola of the church, and the priest's garden, glittering with dew. Then the sky seemed even darker. The shells burst at short, regular intervals. Somewhere at the end of the village flames blazed up: probably a haystack or a hut had caught fire.

Baklanov had to hold up the enemy until Levinson had had time to rally the company, scattered as they were over the whole village, and get them in order. But it was too late: before Baklanov had time to lead the platoon to the common, he saw, by the light of the exploding bombs, the enemy lines running towards him. Judging by the direction of the firing and by the whistling of the bullets, he realized that the enemy were encircling them on the left flank, from the river, and would probably enter the village from that end at any moment.

The platoon began to shoot back, retreating at an oblique angle to the right, running in small groups, zigzagging in the lanes, yards, and gardens. Baklanov listened to the firing near the river; it shifted towards the centre; obviously it would not be long before the entire village would be seized by the enemy. Suddenly the enemy's cavalry flew past with a terrifying yell along the high road; down the street poured a dark, thundering, many-headed lava of men and horses.

No longer attempting to hold up the enemy, Baklanov and the platoon, which had lost about ten men, ran along the unoccupied area in the direction of the forest. And almost at the edge of a ravine, where the last row of huts stood, they

came upon the company, headed by Levinson, who had been waiting for them. The company's ranks had become noticeably thinner.

"Here they are!" Levinson breathed his relief. "To your horses at once!"

They mounted and galloped at breakneck speed towards the forest, which loomed darkly in the depression. The enemy caught sight of them; machine-guns rattled after the fleeing men, and leaden bumble-bees began to drone in the night sky overhead. The quivering, snakily flaming bombs again lighted the sky. They dived from above, spreading their fiery tails, and with a loud hissing buried themselves in the earth near the horses' feet. The horses sprang aside, opening their hot, bloody mouths and screaming like women. The company drew together, leaving writhing bodies on the ground behind them.

Looking backwards, Levinson saw an enormous blaze rise over the village—many houses were burning there. Against this brilliant background black, fiery-faced figures darted hither and thither, singly and in groups.

Stashinsky, who was galloping next to Levinson, suddenly tumbled down from his horse, and for a few seconds he was dragged along the ground, one foot caught in the stirrup. Then his foot slipped loose, and the horse galloped on alone, and the whole company wheeled to avoid this spot, not daring to trample the dead body.

"Levinson, look!" Baklanov cried in excitement, and pointed to the right.

The company had already descended to the bottom of the ravine and were rapidly approaching the forest; from above, crossing the line of the black field and the sky, the enemy's cavalry was racing to intercept them. The horses, their black necks stretched out, their riders crouching low over their necks, could be seen for a moment against the lighter background of the sky, and almost at the same moment they vanished into the darkness, descending the slope of the ravine.

"Faster! Faster!" Levinson shouted, looking back constantly and spurring on his horse.

At last they reached the edge of the forest and jumped off their horses. Baklanov again remained with Dubov's platoon to cover the retreat; the rest of the company ran deeper into the forest, leading their horses by the bridles.

It was quiet and still in the forest. The spattering of the machine-guns, the crackle of rifle fire, the volleys of the field-guns were left behind, and it already seemed as if those alien noises could not disturb the forest stillness. Sometimes they could hear a shell burst loudly, mangling the trees in the forest depths. Here and there the light of the conflagration, penetrating the thickets, threw on the ground and on the trunks of the trees sinister coppery reflections, darkening at the edges, and the damp lichen covering the trees seemed to be soaked in blood.

Levinson turned his horse over to Yefimka and let Kubrak take the lead, telling him which direction to take (he chose a direction only because definite orders were expected of him), and himself stood aside in order to count the number of men who remained.

They passed by him, these men—wet, crushed, and infuriated, bending their knees stiffly and peering into the darkness. Water splashed under their feet; at times the horses sank up to their bellies in the marshy floor of the forest.

It was especially difficult for the guides from Dubov's platoon. Each of them led three horses; only Varya led two—her own and Morozka's. And through the taiga, in the wake of this file of exhausted men, stretched a muddy, crooked, stinking trail—as though a slimy and evil-smelling saurian had crawled there.

Levinson, limping now on one foot, now on the other, went last of all. Suddenly the company stopped.

"What's wrong there?" he asked.

"I don't know," answered a partisan who was walking in front of him. It was Metchik.

"Pass the question along the file."

The answer came soon afterwards, repeated by scores of white, trembling lips:

"There's a bog ahead. No way to go."

Levinson, fighting a sudden trembling in his legs, ran towards Kubrak. He had scarcely vanished in the trees when the whole mass of men surged backwards, scattering in all directions, but everywhere, blocking their way, spread the dark, impassable bog. The only road open to them was the road by which they had come, which the miners' platoon were courageously defending. The firing on the edge of the forest no longer seemed alien to them; it was now a matter of immediate concern; it even seemed to be drawing nearer.

The men were seized with rage and despair. They searched for the person responsible for their plight: it was, needless to say, Levinson. If only they had all seen him at this moment, they would have fallen on him with all the strength of their terror. Since he had brought them here, let him lead them out!

And suddenly he really appeared among them, in the very midst of the panic-stricken men, holding in his hand a lighted torch, which illuminated his bearded face, deadly pale, the teeth clenched, the large eyes, round and burning, passing rapidly from face to face. And in the immediate silence, broken only by the sounds of the lethal game, which was being played on the edge of the forest, his voice—nervous, thin, shrill, and hoarse—rang out, reaching every ear:

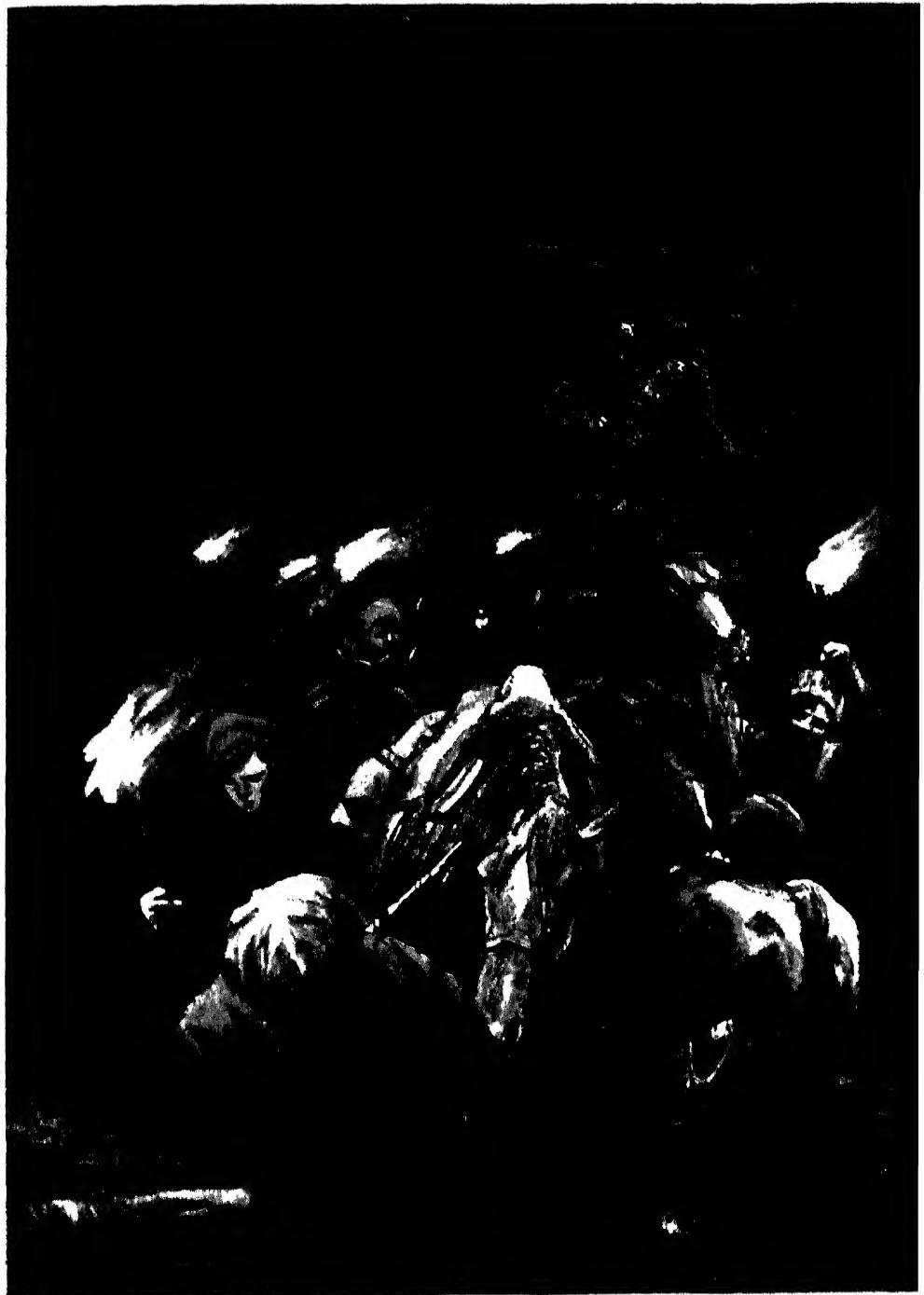
"Who's breaking up the ranks? Get back! Only girls fall into a panic! Silence!" he screamed suddenly, snapping his teeth wolfishly, pulling out his Mauser; and the exclamations of protest at once froze on the men's lips. "Listen to my orders! We'll lay a path over the bog. There's no other way. Borisov!" This was the new commander of the third platoon. "Leave your guides here and go and help Baklanov. Tell him to hold out until I give the order to retreat. Kubrak!"

Detail three men to keep in touch with Baklanov. Listen, all of you! Tie up your horses! Two squads shall cut down bushes. Don't spare your sabres! All the rest—under Kubrak's orders! Obey him without arguing! Kubrak, follow me!" He turned his back to the men and, stooping, went towards the bog, holding overhead the smouldering pine-wood torch.

And the whole mass of men, subdued, crushed, huddled together, their hands raised only a moment before in utter despair, ready to murder and weep, was suddenly caught up in a whirl of action, obedient, inhumanly swift, and furious. In a twinkling the horses were tied up and the axes struck, the alder grove groaned under the blows of the sabres; Borisov's platoon ran off into the darkness, their weapons rattling, their feet squelching, past men who were already bringing the first heavy armfuls of wet branches. The crash of a falling tree was heard, and the huge, dense, rustling mass fell into something soft and treacherous, and by the light of blazing pine-wood they saw the dark-green slimy surface, overgrown with duckweed, heaving and undulating in heavy billows, like the body of a gigantic serpent.

The men swarmed in the mud and water, in this deathly pit, clinging to the branches, by the light of smouldering pine-wood, which picked out from the darkness their distorted faces, their bent backs, and the monstrous tangle of branches. They laboured with their greatcoats thrown off, their tense, sweaty, scratched and bleeding bodies glistening through torn pants and shirts. They lost all sense of time and space, of their own bodies, of shame, pain, exhaustion. Pausing for a moment, they scooped up with their caps the foul marshy water, smelling of the spawn of frogs, and drank greedily, in great gulps, like wounded beasts.

And every moment the firing drew nearer and nearer, growing louder, fiercer. Baklanov sent out one man after another to ask, "Will it be soon? Soon?..."



He had lost almost half his men; he had lost Dubov, who had bled to death from his many wounds, and he was slowly retreating, yielding inch by inch. Finally he reached the bushes which were being cut down to build the brushwood-road; he could not retreat farther. The enemy's bullets whistled thickly over the bog. Several of the men who were labouring there were wounded; Varya dressed their wounds. The horses, frightened by the firing, neighed frenziedly and reared in terror; some of them broke free and ran blindly into the taiga, falling into the bog and screaming piteously for help.

When the partisans holding up the enemy learned that the road was ready at last, they got up and ran. Baklanov, his cheeks hollow, his eyes inflamed, his face black from the smoke of gunpowder, ran after them, threatening them with his empty Colt, weeping with rage.

Shouting and waving their torches and their weapons, dragging along the resisting horses, the company spilled all at once over the pathway. The frantic horses refused to obey their guides and fought madly; the terrified beasts behind clambered over those in front; the brushwood-road cracked and gave way. Almost at the end of the road Metchik's horse fell into the bog; they had to drag it out with ropes amid infuriated yells and curses. Metchik clutched convulsively at the slippery rope which trembled in his hands as the horse struggled madly; he pulled and pulled, stumbling over the slimy branches. And when at last they dragged out the horse, he desperately tried to undo the knot which had been tied round its forelegs. With a wild sort of ecstasy he dug his teeth into that bitter knot, which stank of the marsh and was soaked with horrible slime.

The last to cross were Levinson and Goncharenko.

The demolition man managed to plant a dynamite mine, and the enemy had just reached the road over the bog when it blew up into the air.

Some time passed before the men came to their senses and saw that it was morning. The taiga lay before them in a blanket of sparkling pinkish hoar-frost. Fragments of blue sky shone through the trees; the sun was rising somewhere behind the forest. The men threw away the burning torches which they were still holding for some reason above their heads. They gazed at their bruised, red hands, at the wet, exhausted horses, over which a light, flimsy steam rose, and they looked back wonderstruck at what they had done that night.





XVII. THE NINETEEN

About five versts from the spot where they had built the brushwood-road, a bridge spanned the bog along the route of the Tudo-Vaku state high road. The previous evening, fearing that Levinson might decide against spending the night in the village, the Cossacks had prepared an ambush on the road, about eight versts from the bridge.

They had waited there the whole night in readiness for the company, and had heard the distant volleys of the guns. In the morning a messenger galloped up with orders. They were to stay where they were, since the enemy, having broken through the bog, were heading towards them. Only ten minutes after the messenger had galloped by, Levinson's detachment, knowing nothing of the ambush or of the warn-

ing given by the enemy rider, came out on the Tudo-Vaku high road.

The sun had already risen above the forest; the hoar-frost had melted long since; the sky had opened, spreading high above them, transparently blue and icy. The trees, glistening wet and golden, hung over the road. The day promised to be warm, not like an autumn day at all.

Levinson glanced absently at all this light, pure, shining beauty, and did not feel it. He looked at his company, exhausted, trailing miserably along the road, with two-thirds of the men missing; and he realized how deadly tired he was and how powerless to do anything for his men now, dragging wretchedly behind him. They alone in the whole world remained near and dear to him—these worn-out, faithful men; they were nearer to him than anything else, dearer to him than his own life, because not for a second did he cease to feel his responsibilities towards them; but it appeared that he could do nothing for them now, that he no longer led them, and it was only they themselves who were unaware of this and continued to drag themselves after him, like a herd accustomed to follow its leader. And it was precisely this terrible thing that he had feared most of all in the early morning hours yesterday, when he had thought of Metelitsa's death.

He tried to take himself in hand, to concentrate on something practical and necessary, but his thoughts wandered and grew confused; his eyes closed stickily, and queer images, fragments of memories, vague impressions of his immediate surroundings, all of them befogged and contradictory, floated mistily in his head, changing ceaselessly, soundlessly, in an incorporeal swarm. "Why this long, endless road, and these wet leaves, and this dead sky, for which I have no use now? Yes, I must get to the Tudo-Vaku valley. Tudo-Vaku valley—what a strange name! But how tired I am, how I long to sleep! What else can these men want of me when I want to sleep so much? He's talking to me about scouts. Yes, to be sure, scouts.... He's got a round and kind head... like my

son's . . . and of course we must send out scouts, and after that . . . sleep, sleep. . . . Not even like my son's, but. . . . What is it? What did you say?" he asked suddenly, raising his head.

Baklanov was riding at his side.

"I say we ought to send out scouts."

"Yes, we ought to do that. Give the necessary orders, please."

A minute afterwards, riding at a weary trot, someone overtook Levinson. The commander followed the rider's hunched back and recognized Metchik. It seemed to him that it was somehow wrong that Metchik should go out on patrol, but he could not bother his head to discover exactly what was wrong, and the next moment he forgot all about it. Then somebody else rode past.

"Morozka!" Baklanov called to the second scout. "Don't lose sight of each other!"

"Is he still alive?" Levinson thought. "And Dubov's dead. Poor Dubov! But what did happen to Morozka? Ah yes, that was last night. Lucky for him I didn't see him."

Metchik, who had already ridden on a good way, looked back; Morozka was about fifty yards behind him, and the company could still be seen. Then both the company and Morozka were lost behind a bend in the road. Nivka did not want to trot, and mechanically Metchik spurred her on; he could not quite understand why he had been sent on ahead but they had ordered him to go at a trot and he obeyed them.

The road wound along wet slopes, thickly overgrown with oaks and maples which still wore their red leaves. Nivka trembled nervously and kept close to the bushes. She took the uphill stretch at a walk. Metchik, dozing in the saddle, no longer urged her forward. At times he came to himself and gazed wonderingly at the impenetrable depths of the forest. It had neither beginning nor end, just as there was neither beginning nor end to his state of sleepiness, dejection, and the feeling of not being there at all.

Suddenly Nivka snorted in terror and plunged into the bushes, pressing Metchik against a yielding mass of branches.

He raised his head and his sleepiness at once left him, banished by an indescribable panic: on the road, a few paces from him, stood the Cossacks.

"Get down!" one of them said in a husky whisper.

Another Cossack seized Nivka by the bridle. Metchik uttered a low cry, slipped from the saddle and dodging in a humiliating manner, suddenly hurled himself with lightning speed down the slope. His arms crashed against the damp, rough trunk of a tree; he sprang up and slipped again. Dumb with terror, he floundered on all fours for several minutes; then he jumped up at last and dashed along the ravine, hardly conscious of his body, clutching at anything that came within his grasp, and leaping incredibly high. They were pursuing him; the bushes crackled behind him, and somebody ran and swore, gasping in fury.

Morozka, knowing that there was another scout in front of him, paid little attention to what was going on about him. He was in that state of extreme exhaustion in which every thought, even the most vital thoughts, vanishes and there remains only the urgent desire to rest—to rest at any cost. He thought no more of his own life, of Varya, or of what Goncharenko would think of him; he even had not the strength to regret the death of Dubov, although Dubov had been as near to him as anybody; he thought only of the moment when the promised land would at last open in front of him and he could lay his weary head in peace. This promised land he visualized in the shape of a large, peaceful village, bathed in sunshine, full of grazing cows and good people, and the smell of hay and cattle. He dreamed of how he would tie up his horse, and then drink a bowl of milk with a great piece of sweet-smelling rye bread, and then he would climb up to a hayloft and fall fast asleep, his head lying on his shoulder and his warm greatcoat tucked under his feet.

And when the yellow cap-bands of the Cossacks suddenly leaped up in front of him, and Judas backed up sharply, taking him into a clump of guelder-rose bushes, whose red

leaves trembled like drops of blood before his eyes, his joyful vision of a large sunny village merged into the instantaneous realization of the unheard-of, heinous treachery which had just been perpetrated here....

"He ran away, the viper!" Morozka said, picturing with extraordinary sharpness the hateful clear eyes of Metchik. He felt at the same time a torturing pity, which wrenched his heart, for himself and for the men who were riding behind him.

He did not regret that he was to die in a moment, that he would cease to feel, to suffer, and to move; he could not even imagine himself in that strange and fantastic state, since he still lived, suffered, and moved. But he understood quite clearly that he would never see that big village of his vision bathed in sunshine nor the dear comrades and brothers who were riding behind him. Nonetheless they were so much a part of him, those tired, unsuspecting men who had entrusted themselves to him, that he could not think of himself, could only think of warning them of the danger while there was yet time.... He snatched out his revolver and, holding it high above his head, so that he might be better heard, shot three times into the air as had been agreed.

At that moment there was a flash and a roar, the world seemed to split in two, and he and Judas fell into the bushes, his head thrown backwards.

When Levinson heard the shots—so unexpected and so incredible in his present state of mind—he could not at first grasp their meaning. He understood their meaning only when he heard the volley fired at Morozka, and the horses stood stock-still, lifting their heads and pricking up their ears.

He looked back helplessly, searching for support from others for the first time; but in the partisans' long and pale faces, which seemed to blend into a single, horrible, dumbly questioning face, he read the same helplessness and fear. "Here it is—what I feared all along!" Levinson thought,

and made such a gesture with his hand as though he sought something to hold on to, but could not find it.

Suddenly he distinguished very clearly the simple, boyish face of Baklanov, a face somewhat naive, but blackened and hardened by weariness and the smoke of gunpowder. Holding a revolver in one hand, the other tightly clutching the horse's withers, on which the marks of his stubby, boyish fingers were plainly imprinted, Baklanov stared tensely in the direction from which the shots had come. And his naive face, with its high cheekbones, leaned forward expectantly, awaiting orders, burning with the genuine and dominating passion in the name of which the best men of the company had died.

Levinson started and drew himself up; something sweet and painful throbbed in him. Suddenly he drew out his sword, and he, too, leaned forward with glittering eyes.

"Shall we try to break through?" he asked Baklanov hoarsely, unexpectedly raising his sabre above his head so that it gleamed in the sun. And every partisan likewise started and drew himself upright in the stirrups.

Baklanov cast a wild look at the sabre, swung around to face the company, and shouted something in a piercing, sharp voice, something which Levinson did not catch, for at that moment, carried away by the same inner force which governed Baklanov and which had made him raise his sabre, he flew along the road, feeling sure that the whole company would at once sling themselves after him.

When he looked back a few moments later, the men were indeed galloping after him, crouching over their horses, their chins thrust aggressively forward, their eyes burning with the same tense passion which he had seen in Baklanov.

This was his last clear impression, because the next instant something blinding and deafening crashed down upon him, gripping him, whirling him, crushing him. Insensible, conscious only that he was still alive, he hurtled over a boiling, orange-coloured abyss.

Metchik did not look back and no longer heard his pursuers, though he knew that he was still being pursued. When the three shots rang out, one after another, and the volley followed, he decided that they were firing at him and he ran faster. Suddenly the ravine widened into a small wooded valley. Metchik turned to right and left until finally he again rolled down a slope. At this moment a new volley thundered, thicker and louder than the first, then another and another, without a pause. The whole forest shook and came to life.

"Oh, my God, my God! Oh, oh, my God!..." Metchik alternately whispered and cried out at each new deafening salvo, deliberately, pitifully twitching his scratched face as children do when they are trying to burst into tears. But his eyes were odiously, shamefully dry. He ran on and on, expending his last strength.

The noise of the firing began to die down; it seemed to have changed its direction. Then it ceased altogether.

Metchik looked back several times; he was not being pursued now. Nothing disturbed the remote, hollow stillness which lay about him now. Gasping, he fell down behind the nearest bush. His heart beat rapidly. Bent double, his hands turned upwards under his cheek, staring fixedly in front of him, he lay motionless for several minutes. About ten paces from him, on a bare slender birch-tree, which curved almost to the ground and was bathed in sunshine, sat a little chipmunk, looking at him with naive, yellowish eyes.

All at once Metchik sat up, clasped his head, and groaned loudly. The chipmunk gave a terrified squeak and vanished in the grass. An insane sparkle appeared in Metchik's eyes. He dug his fingers into his hair and howled in agony, rolling on the ground. "What have I done? Oh, what have I done?" he repeated, rolling on his elbows and stomach. Each moment he perceived more clearly, with increasing shame and self-pity, the real meaning of his flight, the meaning of the first three shots and of all the firing which had followed. "What have I done? How could I have done it? Me, such

a good; honest man who wished nobody any harm—oh, oh, how could I?..."

The more odious and villainous his behaviour seemed to him, the better, purer, and nobler he felt he had been before he had done this thing. And that tormented him not so much because scores of men who had entrusted themselves to him had perished as a result of his act, as because its ineffaceable, filthy, odious stain gave the lie to all the goodness and purity which he attributed to himself.

Mechanically he drew out his revolver and stared at it with horror and incredulity. But he knew that he would never kill himself, that he was incapable of killing himself; for there was nothing in the world he loved more than himself—his own white, grimy, powerless hand, his whining voice, his sufferings, his own actions—even the most despicable of them. Furtively, stealthily, guiltily, horrified even by the touch of the oil which covered the revolver, trying to pretend that he did not know what he was about, he hastily put the revolver back in his pocket.

He did not groan or weep now. Hiding his face in his hands, he lay quietly on his stomach, and everything that he had lived through during the last few months, since he had left the town, again passed before him in a wearisome, mournful procession: his naive dreams, of which he was now ashamed, the anguish of his first encounters and his first wounds; Morozka; the hospital; the old man Pika with his silvery wisps of hair; the dead Frolov; Varya with her large, sad eyes which were unlike any eyes he had seen before or would ever see in the future; the last terrible crossing over the bog—compared with which everything else seemed trivial.

"I don't want to live like that any longer," Metchik thought with unexpected frankness and sobriety, and he was overcome with pity for himself. "I can't stand it any longer. I can't live such a low, inhuman, horrible life," he thought again, eager to fan this feeling of self-pity, hoping to drown in these cowardly thoughts his own meanness and nakedness.

He still continued to reproach himself and felt sorry for what he had done, but he could no longer restrain the personal hopes and joyful ambitions which at once stirred in him at the thought that he was now entirely free and could go where life held no such terrors and nobody would know what he had done. "I'll go back to the town now; there's nothing else left for me to do," he decided, trying to give to this thought an accent of grievous necessity, but scarcely able to repress a mingled feeling of joy and shame at the prospect and the fear that his dreams might not come true.

The sun had climbed round to the other side of the drooping birch, which was now completely in shadow. Metchik took out his revolver and threw it far away into the bushes. Then he found a tiny spring; he washed himself and sat down near it. He did not yet dare to go out into the road. "What if the Whites are there?" he thought fearfully. He heard the tiny spring tinkling gently in the grass. "Well, what's the difference?" he thought abruptly, with that frankness and sobriety he now knew how to find beneath the thick layer of good, kind, sentimental thoughts and feelings.

He sighed deeply, buttoned up his shirt, and walked slowly in the direction of the Tudo-Vaku high road.

Levinson did not know how long his state of semi-consciousness had lasted; it seemed very long to him, though actually it was not more than a minute. When he came to himself, he was surprised to find himself still in the saddle, but the sabre was no longer in his hand. In front of him bobbed the black-maned head of his horse, one ear spattered with blood.

It was only then that he became aware of the firing and realized that it was directed at them: the bullets screamed thickly overhead; but he likewise understood that the shots came from behind and that the most terrible moment was

also behind. Then two riders came into line with him—Varya and Goncharenko. The blaster's cheek was streaked with blood. Levinson remembered the company, and looked back. But there was no company: the whole road was strewn with the dead bodies of men and horses. A few riders, led by Kubrak, tried desperately to catch up with Levinson; farther back were other small groups that became smaller with every moment. A figure on a limping horse, dragging at the rear, waved an arm and shouted. He was surrounded by men with yellow cap-bands who began to beat him with the butts of their rifles; he lurched and fell. Levinson grimaced painfully and turned away.

At this moment he, Varya, and Goncharenko reached a bend in the road. The noise of the firing grew fainter; the bullets ceased to scream past their ears. Mechanically, Levinson began to rein in his horse. One by one, the partisans who had broken through joined him. Goncharenko counted nineteen men, including himself and Levinson. They galloped down the slope for a long time, without uttering a single word, staring with eyes which still hid terror, but which filled gradually with joy, at the narrow, yellow, silent road that ran swiftly ahead like a hunted yellow dog....

Little by little the horses fell into a trot, and now they could distinguish in detail the burnt tree-stumps, the bushes, the mileposts, the clear sky overhanging the distant forest. Then the horses went on at a walk.

Levinson rode a little in front of the others, lost in thought, his head drooping. Sometimes he looked back helplessly, as if he wanted to ask something and could not remember what; he looked at them with a prolonged, unseeing stare, his glance strange and full of pain. Suddenly he reined in his horse and turned back; for the first time a look of understanding came into his large deep blue eyes. The eighteen men stopped as one. It became very quiet.

"Where's Baklanov?" Levinson asked.

The eighteen men looked at him in silence and wonderment.

"They've killed Baklanov," Goncharenko said at last, and he stared sternly at his big, knotted hand which held the reins.

Varya, sitting with her back hunched by his side, suddenly fell forward on the neck of her horse and sobbed loudly and hysterically. Her long, ruffled plaits hung almost to the ground and seemed to writhe. The horse twitched its ears wearily and drew in its sagging lip. Siskin looked sideways at Varya, gulped, and turned quickly away.

Levinson's eyes remained fixed for several seconds above the men's heads. Then all at once he seemed somehow to collapse and shrink, and everybody at once saw that he had grown very weak and become much older. But he was no longer ashamed of his weakness and he no longer tried to hide it; he sat with downcast eyes, slowly blinking his long wet eyelashes, and the tears ran down his beard. The men looked away from him in fear that they, too, might break down.

Levinson turned his horse and slowly rode on ahead. The company followed him.

"Don't cry. It won't do any good," Goncharenko said guiltily, patting Varya on the shoulder.

Time and again, when Levinson managed to forget himself, he looked back uncertainly; remembering that Baklanov was not there, he began to cry again.

So they rode out from the forest—nineteen of them.

The forest ended unexpectedly, and they saw a high and vast blue sky and bright, russet-coloured, harvested fields spreading out on either side and bathed in the sunshine. On one side, beyond a knot of willows, through which the gleaming blue surface of a swollen river could be seen, lay a threshing-ground, resplendent with the golden crowns of the stout haystacks. There another life was seething, a gay and busy life. People swarmed there like many-coloured insects; sheaves of wheat flew through the air; the threshing-machine whirred-with a clear, dry sound; excited voices and bursts of shrill, girlish laughter rose from the whirling clouds of shining claff and dust. Behind the river, propping

up the sky and rooted in yellow-tressed woods, loomed the blue mountain ranges, and through their toothed summits a transparent frame of pinkish-white cloud, salted by the sea, poured into the valley, as frothy and bubbly as milk fresh from the cow.

Levinson looked silently, with moist eyes, at the vast sky and earth, which promised bread and rest, at these alien people on the threshing-ground whom he would soon have to make his own—as near and dear to him as were the eighteen who followed him in silence; and he ceased crying. A man has to live and do his duty.

1925-1926

THE END



